Sulfur 4

FEATURING: STUDIOUSLY UNPREPARED BY
WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS ▲ TWENTY TWO POEMS BY
PAUL BLACKBURN ▲ SKIES II BY RON SILLIMAN

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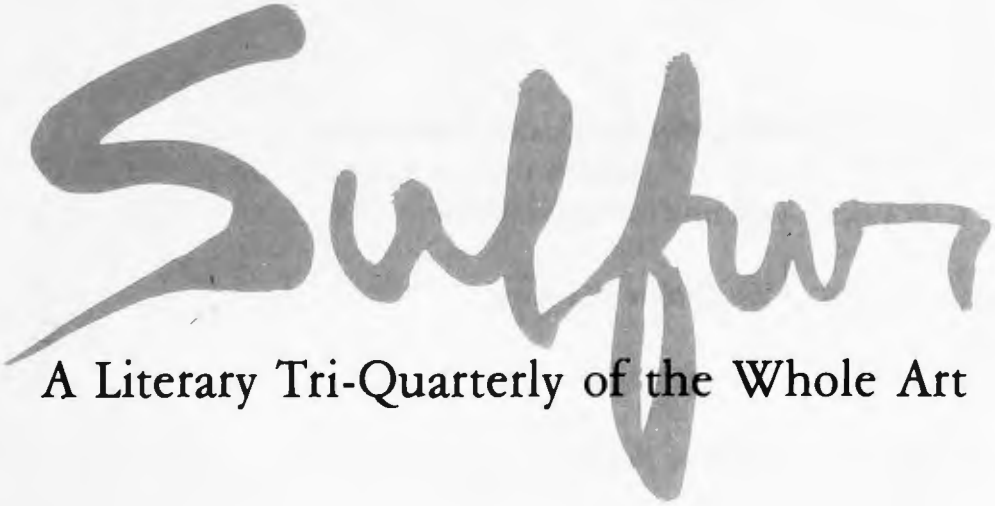

A Literary Tri-Quarterly of the Whole Art

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Studiously Unprepared:

Notes for Various Talks and Readings: May 1940 to April 1941

9 Ridge Road, Rutherford, N.J.

Edited by Paul Mariani:

It was January 1940 and Williams was grappling for a major poetic form, a way to shape the epic that was stirring within him, the epic *Paterson*, and he didn't know where to turn. To complicate matters he was being asked more and more to speak on the college circuit about the new poetry and about poetic form and he would have to do so without in fact having the goods to show. To help himself, he began keeping a small looseleaf notebook for the barebones of the lectures he was planning to give beginning in the spring of that year, lectures at Dartmouth, at Cooper Union, at San Juan, Puerto Rico, at Bread Loaf, and at Vassar.[1] And there would be others in 1940 and '41 and '42, like the one he gave to an unimpressed audience at Harvard at Theodore Spencer's invitation in March of '41, which are not among these notes but which are likewise on the one subject Williams kept hammering home: the Basis of Modern Poetic Form.

There are extant notes for the Dartmouth talk scribbled longhand on Williams' prescription pads (in this instance provided by the West End Drug Store at 328 Union Avenue, Al Cornish, Registered Pharmacist, the owner) and dated January 3, 1940, as Williams began to think on paper of what he wanted to tell the students and faculty at Dartmouth when he returned there in May.[2] He'd visited Dartmouth earlier, in April of '36, taking the train up then and revising the galleys for his new book of poems, *Adam & Eve & the City*, while he thought about poetic form and formulated his attack on the old fixed forms, the sonnet in particular. And he'd hit it good that time, coming smack up against one of the professors who'd maintained that the old forms were as viable as ever and that it made as little sense to be

concerned about creating new forms for every poem one wrote as it did to have to construct a new sort of ship every time you wanted to make a voyage across the Atlantic. Hadn't Francoise Villon gotten along nicely with the Ballade form, an old form ready to hand and there for the taking?

It was a very subtle question based on an inexact anologue and it had Williams thinking. After all, ships were continually being modified, and it made no sense to travel across the Atlantic with a giant mirror turned towards Europe reflecting all the glory that had been the old world's. You could burn yourself that way. As for Villon, he had taken a form and had in fact brought it to its perfection, so that those who followed after could admire the form but would have to use something else if they were to do work comparable to Villon's. Otherwise there was the danger of merely repeating Villon, and that meant the inevitable withering and death of the poet who used those old static forms. So with Shakespeare and the blank verse line for drama. To try and use that in 1940 would mean inevitable failure. Williams had not forgotten that exchange at Dartmouth, and he was going back now, four years later, hoping to arm himself with some new arguments and some more thought on the nature of modern poetry.

If the notes for Williams' talks begin to sound repetitive, it is important to remember just how obsessed he was with finding the actual new in the poetry he and others were writing at the moment. It is important too to remember that when he wrote these notes he did not yet *have* the new poetry. Try as he might in his unpublished sheaf of poems, "Detail and Parody for Patterson" (1938-39) and later in *The Broken Span,* the pamphlet of new poems he had just published on the second of January, 1941, Williams knew that he did not yet have in his possession the new poetry he wanted to write. He could to some degree say what it was not, and he could say where he thought the new poetry would come from. But he did not yet have the goods and he knew it, which only made matters worse. Which is why he became so touchy when he read with W.H. Auden at Cooper Union in April, 1940, and why, less than two weeks later, he became so defensive when he read an essay by Conrad Aiken in *The New Republic* attacking the so-called "anti-poetic" in Modern Poetry. Since Wallace Stevens had invented the term to describe Williams' own practice seven years earlier (a term which had become widespread by 1940 to describe Williams), Williams was convinced that Aiken had used him as a straw man to say what the new poetry should *not* be like.

Auden had just turned 33 when he read that night with some of the New York boys—Malcolm Cowley, Alfred Kreymborg, and Williams—and Williams was 56, a veteran of the Generation of 1914. It was a packed hall they read to, but Williams knew the crowd had come to hear the young Englishman, who had kiddingly begged them to "forgive" his accent. Auden had them in his pocket and Williams could see that, but, when Auden passed him to sit down, Williams thought he could see in the younger man's eyes not so much the look of the victor as the poet who knows that, though the night is his, the other poet has something he himself would very much like to have. After all, why had Auden come here to America, Williams would ask elsewhere, if not to learn what he could from the American language and make it his own. For Williams, Auden was still capitalizing on the old. Auden had "won" because he had given these people something they were already accustomed to: new poems written in the old modes, the old accustomed excellences, while Williams was still struggling to discover the radiant new poetry which would reflect the reality of the time, language reflecting reality as it existed in America in 1940. Let there be a *Paterson*, let those lines exist, and *then* measure those lines against Auden's best.

In time, of course, a responsive audience would be able to do just that, measure the one line against the other. But in 1940 and '41 and '42 that was not possible, because Williams had yet to discover the lines he was after. In the meantime all he could do was gesticulate, speak broadly about theory, try to be as practical as possible, while back at his typewriter he tried on sheet after sheet of paper to actually write the poems which would show clearly the new measure he had been talking about. In the meantime, he would have to play Professor Mendelyeef until the time when he could switch roles and play Madame Curie, discovering the radiant gist *in the poem itself.*

And what would the poet as scientist tell his skeptical audiences? That the new poetry should be able to use anything—ANYTHING—for its subject. There were no particular subjects more conducive to poetic treatment, he had maintained and would go on maintaining. A poem could be about anything. And the new poetry would have to incorporate the language as it was actually spoken and heard around one every day. And if that language did not lend itself to the old metrical patterns—the iambic pentameter among them—then the old forms would have to give way to new patterns and new

forms which *could* capture the language as we heard it. For to change the language so as to conform to a pattern was in fact to change the very meaning of the poem.

With what was the poet, then, to experiment with in the line? Why, with that which constituted the line, the elements which made up that line: the poetic foot itself. We would have to rethink the very elements of prosody, for in 1940 Saintsbury's laws governing the order and definition of metrical composition were as outmoded as the Newtonian universe. Why, they were smashing atomic particles in 1940, reconstituting the very building blocks which made up the physical universe. And if the imagination could do that to the world, then it could do it for language itself. "What we need in verse today," Williams would tell the congress of writers assembled in Puerto Rico in the spring of '41, "is a great technician," one who could "*hear* the normal language" and then "rediscover in the vernacular about him... the simple elements that, also, made up the old rigidities" reassembled now into new forms, new poems "expansive enough to include the whole armamentarium of the mind as we know it today." Poems "uncramped, unclipped, uncompressed" by not being forced to serve the old aristocracies—the old poetic forms—which belonged to another world view, another way of thinking no longer consonant with our own moment.

For too long the really fresh and exciting language, the raw, the living, had been relegated to the underground, the underworld: stories by society's outcasts, criminals, figures like Henry Miller, nameless jazz players who spoke a language dripping with life, the vibrant vernacular of his Polish and Italian and Black patients. But why did this powerful, raw language have to be discarded by the American Universities in favor of the acceptable, the proper, the correct? Why not make that descent into the vernacular, as H.L. Mencken had done in researching his study, *The American Language*, why not take that living language, its words and its rhythms, and make of them a music, a polyphony, a gorgeous sonata?

And who had actually composed, however failingly, in this new American language, Williams had been asked again and again at least from the early 1930s on. Stevens had done it, and Marianne Moore, and sometimes Cummings and Eugene O'Neill in his plays, and—among the younger writers—Louis Zukofsky here and there and Muriel Rukeyser and others. And of course Ezra Pound. And Williams. And so he would read from his own poems to audiences, asking them to try and hear what he had tried to do over

the past thirty years, in poems like "To Elsie" and "Last Words of My English Grandmother" and "An Early Martyr" and "The Term," opening his volume of *The Complete Collected Poems* which Jim Laughlin had published a few years before, asking them to hear it here and here and here:

A rumpled sheet
of brown paper
about the length

and apparent bulk
of a man was
rolling with the

wind slowly over
and over in
the street....

Make it of this, and this, and this, the words moving contrapuntally to the lines and the stanzas, creating a tension, an antagonistic co-operation, and in the meantime giving pleasure with each new turn and each new surprise.

Here, then, is a selection of Williams' lecture notes on the only topic that consistently consumed him: the making of poems. There are other lectures preserved in the Williams' papers, whether at Buffalo or Yale or Texas or Kent State or elsewhere, but these notes, preserved in Williams' notebook in the early 1940s, are indicative of the concerns which preoccupied him even as he worked furiously and—for long periods—failingly, to discover and invent the new poetry he was looking for. And when the first significant later breakthrough came, it came soon after his Vassar lecture, the last lecture contained in these notes, given to the student body at Vassar on February 10, 1942, the same month his son, Bill, was inducted into the U.S. Navy. For the war which had signalled that winter of discontent in 1940 had now come home. At Vassar, one of his manuscript notes for *Paterson* tells us, the professor who introduced him quipped that she wasn't sure the girls at Vassar should be listening to Dr. Williams after some of the things she'd heard about him.

No matter the academy's response. For the catastrophic birth which Williams had so long been waiting for, the violent transformation which would signal the death of the old and the birth of the new, was about to descend on Williams. The outcast, the despised prophet, had managed to come through. On April 22nd, Williams would write in a poem about vio-

lent change these words:

> The fracture will come, the death dealing
> chemistry cannot be long held back....
> Only he who had been confined
> in disgrace underground is rescued alive
> and he knows nothing more of it
> than to stand and curse the authorities
> who left him there so long without food
> and liquor while they were digging him out....

Having thus found, for the moment at least, a replica in words of the thing he had been pointing to for so long, Williams could close his lecture book and go on now to the thing which had caused the seismographic disturbances in the first place: that impossible poem, *Paterson*. He had found something of interest returning in the dark to the laboratory of his imagination: the beloved, the radiant gist, the thing itself.

Δ

Notes: Dartmouth—1940 [May 16]

There is an aristocracy of taste that is not overly selective:
Henry IV Elizabeth

* * * * *

1. Studiously unprepared.

2. Whatever contribution I can have made to the study and enjoyment of present day verse is gathered for the convenience of speaking of it—under 3 heads.

   a. An attitude toward the subject matter or the materials of which verse is to be made that is inclusive—not selective: based on the importance of form (Rembrandt, Side of Beef).

   b. The use of an auditory language rather than a traditionally

written one, that is to say, American-English as I hear it—based again, on form—Since from that springs:

c. A form that is primarily a metrical pattern which is to be *heard*, not made the opportunity, the occasion, for a printer's holiday—or even a reader's convenience:—a form which springs from the spoken language and is to be discovered in it.

3. It is on this that I want to speak tonight, an informal commentary on Poetic Form—For this pattern is the *whole* excuse for the poet's existence and, finally, his only defense:

The Introduction.

Read

Notes

and a few latest examples.

Notes:

A poem is an object made of words. It has various forms and varies in meaning, among other things, according to its form.

That is, to be precise, one of the poem's meanings will vary in ratio to the form.

Thus the form of a poem can and does either complete or defeat a possible meaning.

And if a meaning is to be insinuated into a poem above or below a usual attention it may be by the manipulation of its form that this will be attempted.

Thus arises the bitterness over the matter of change in form as it touches new poems: the meaning has been altered.

And so new poems bespeaking a new order will seek new forms against the resistance of those who do not accept the new meaning.

Notes: (2)

The secret of modern poetry would be to use a modern means—that is, primarily, modern language devices—to achieve ALL the effects and significances mastered in the classics by devices now largely obsolete.

There are 3 aspects native to form: the timeless, the timely and the immediate.

The classics attack us from the past by their form in the order above named—from the timeless to the immediate. We must attack in a reverse order starting with the present character of a language—upon the timeliness and immediacy of whose effects we must largely stand. (Important).

Notes: (3)

We must imbed what we have to say in the form of the poem—for safe keeping. This requires invention, all of it.

But what is poetic form? Negatively, poetic form is all that is NOT timeless in the constitution of the poem as the prose meaning will be, but timely, to the moment: All that is not comprehended under title of the indestructible prose meaning.

But by the form one renews meaning, constantly refreshes it.

Positively, when the form has been invented, then it has been defined and then only. The newly formed poem, in the new mode, is the only possible definition of the new form.

Notes: (4)

Short Essay on Modern Poetry: (Note following the Peter Cooper [Hall] evening, April 12, 1940.)

My position has certain disadvantages which I hope I am the first to acknowledge. In seeking a basis! a basis! a basis! for a new (to be old) construction and criticism I must not be affected by a sentimental attachment to my own work as it stands.

I am seeking a basis, not a personal achievement as "success"—save in a very secondary sense.

Thus I have rejected the accepted basis with all its excellences. By this I have rejected many good things weakening myself accordingly as my relative failure compared with Auden in the reading of the poems demonstrates. He has kept many of the old excellences. More power to him.

Roundness, fullness—all sorts of attractive detail in composition I have let go by the board.

This is bad for me, bad in every way unless the lack is replaced by something in my own mode to compensate for it.

My work is incomplete, not more than in the making (I avoid the use of the word "laboratory" in this context as raising unfortunate connotations.)

How to scan my verse or to give any excuse whatever for my divisions into what seem arbitrary lines and stanzas? The basis for completing what I do is often lacking.

Well, it is lacking! and must be built. I get nowhere by saying it is not lacking. The man working from inside the accepted pattern will exceed me in his accomplishment except in one thing: the plan. I hope, actually, to replace him. We look at each other obliquely.

But I must say to myself, Why do I pattern my verse this way? I must complete, perfect, make new, but I haven't YET made good, not yet.

As far as I can see my defects lie in my excellence: trying for a new foot I have instinctively divided the verses and lines so as to avoid the annulling stasis of the accepted patterns which *put an incorrect mean-*

ing on what I would say. That I have refused, without yet knowing how fully to form my own meaning by the new form.

I am not yet master of the new form but I must still reject the old.

Anything, to get bits, moments of effectiveness instinctively—a piece that goes well here and there—for proof, to be more fully studied.

Yes, if I do that. There's the direction of movement.

In other words, I need more study, more discovery, more understanding in my work—of what I have done and what is still to do—so that it resembles more the work of men writing in the well understood pattern, more like theirs in every way EXCEPT the one, basic new plan.

What I must have is a new MEASURE which I have already achieved instinctively but which I have not yet found. It will not be a *visual* division of the parts of a poem into units but must have its basis in a fuller conception of the poetic foot—in the SOUND, that is, of the poem.

This underlies a correct attitude toward "free verse." There is no such thing. It is in reality no more than an instinctive perception of a new but unrealized measure, the same which I am always seeking.

Auden's success before the audience as contrasted with the rest of us was the feature of the evening. But listen as I would I could not but find that he has travelled the world without perceiving a new measure such as I seek. What he actually did in his best poems, his best successes with the audience, was to give an able exposition of new materials upon the old accepted basis. So at least my old perceptions said to me.

Peter Monroe Jack, in introducing me, missed the point entirely: I was a physician, a fact finder, truthful and downright. Fair enough but he appeared to have no inkling of what my purpose is toward verse. And how, if at all, I have succeeded and where and to what

extent.

The young man who came up afterward with a marked up program, on which had been mimeographed two of my short poems, and asked me on what basis I had divided the lines and stanzas that way was much nearer the truth.

"Is the division visual?" he said.

No. Not entirely—but perhaps so, actually, I had to acknowledge. For lack of better means. An attempt to arrange the material of the verse NOT by common stress or ordinary quantity but an attempt to arrange it after a metrical pattern that ignores other basis than trial BY EAR—and failing that—convenience.

What else?

I'm as interested as he. He shouldn't have asked me that question. He might with his fresh ear have perceived, as an onlooker, and suspected, surmised, in what I had freshly failed.

Looking ahead, what poems are to be written by me, if any, must for success incorporate more accurately and fully what I have learned so far.

What is in the past is trash.

Notes: (5)

Le style c'est l'homme.
Very well.
The form is the people.

An Informal Commentary on Poetic Form:

Professor S. objected to my emphasis on form saying it was not as important as I imagined. For example he pointed out the ballade form used by Villon—a mere parlor game in his time!

Ah, but with Villon the feat was to make it serious. He did. There the

form spoke, adding a timely meaning, by the very selection of that form, to the significance of the poems—a hundred chromatic overtones to the meaning had it been expressed in any other form.

The excellence of the poems, timeless as it might be, gained by that form a pungency that made them doubly valuable by its timeliness.

Notes: (6)

There are two ways to read poems for an audience.

One is as entertainment when the performer should be a virtuoso.

The other is for enlightenment as to the meaning when the reader should be capable of clarifying the means used in the construction. Here the voice is secondary.

Yvor Winters wants us to trim the *form* to an externally conventional pattern. But he forgets that this automatically fixes a *meaning* also of arbitrarily conventional pattern.

He wants to keep something which to me is trivial, worse, a meaning I fear.

Notes: (7)

A new measure in the structural form of the poem to give an enhanced freedom of movement to the understanding within the limits of the composition.

This is the necessity facing the broadening of knowledge today in the social and physical sciences as contrasted with formerly accepted limits.*

*The mind, that is, has taken the pattern from its new habits enforced by the social and physical sciences.
And so for satisfaction it must have a poetic form of a like complexity and inclusiveness,
as the sonata and symphony contrasts for satisfaction with a tooting on the pipes of Pan.

There is a time element to the significance of poetic form as with anything else: To Villon or to Whitman the first element, the life of the poem, must be "inspiration," instinctive satisfaction, a challenge as against antiquity and the immediate world successfully met. To their first readers and listeners wonder and delight.

This is instinctive acceptance. You get the same from hot jazz sometimes or anything of the sort.

Such occasionally as a good, ringing cheap magazine story.

But there follows a lingering significance which is social and basic. I doubt very much if the poet ever knows very much about it or should care—to an extent sufficient, for instance, to have his plays printed. It might unhorse him in his jumps.

But there it is—and it lies, if the poem is to be kept, in its inner relationships as a work of genius.

Notes: (8)

The battle is forming, poetic form is the issue. Sides are being taken.

Conrad Aiken following his capital poem on Spain in the new *Poetry* has issued a critical statement in the *New Republic* condemning the new trend.

But what, in his new poem, is there of the new Spain? Nothing. In spite of the obvious excellence of the poem it leaves a camphorish taste in the mouth as compared with the Guernica, Picasso's mural.

What is happening?

Poetry, in the one mode, has become structural. The fullness Aiken seeks, in France they say, has now gone over into prose, the poetic novel.

Poetry, bare, stript down, has come to resemble modern architecture in that as against the ornate past.

Poetry for March, 1940, contains Conraid Aiken's "Spain, 1927,"—a poem several pages in length. It is a well built and impressive piece of work which I enjoyed but the form of it oppressed me.

Oddly enough, as if he sensed my objections, Aiken defends the style of this poem—indirectly of course—in a general critical statement appearing in *The New Republic*, April 22, 1940, under the title, "Poetry: 1940 Model," which he condemns.

Reply to an Attack

Dear old Aiken
First he spawns Eliot
Then he turns round
and tried to spawn
himself

Poor old Aiken
How he must be achin'
Isn't worth the takin'
Put him on a shelf

There is much justice in what Aiken offers provided both sides realize the situation in its proper relationships.

What Conrad Aiken does not see is the direction of the change taking place.

It is true, we have abandoned much good that was in the old.

We'll have to come back to that again later. But we have had to lighten the load to get forward with an advance the necessity for which he does not seem even to suspect.

Unsatisfactory as the present modes may be we can't go back. Form is imperative to much that seems formless today but only a NEW form that will include much that Aiken speaks of loosely as the anti-poetic.

The battle is defining itself, form is the issue. We have waited a long

time for this phase to break. Thank you Aiken.

But take Aiken's own excellent poem, *Spain, 1927*, spoken of above. Fine as it is it seems stuffy to me, even granting all its virtues and leaves a camphorish aftersmell in the nostrils. AND you have a feeling that no matter how good it is or might have been made to be it could NEVER in that form have been as fine as a modern poem should be since the form itself is defective: an old mode.

It could never, in that form, for instance, give the enlivening impression, the truth that must have been latent there in Spain even in 1927, that flowers in Picasso's *Guernica.*

Don't speak to me of the anti-poetic. There is no such thing. It all goes in if one could learn how a poem should be made to include it, Baudelaire notwithstanding.

Much that was poetry in the tone Aiken uses has gone over into prose, into the poetic novel—in France, they say, this is particularly true.

But poetry, seeking a new form, has at this stage taken upon itself a bare, structural character at its best—or so I think it should.

Notes: (9)

And so to conclude: Poetic form is not casual, to be selected at the whim or according to the mere disposition of the poet, but intimately related to its day—

as the ballade form was related to Villon in his time—

at its most acute, itself the expression and greatest fulfillment of its time, without which no poem can be at the peak of its possible excellence.

For reality, that full sense of conviction, one must write in a manner and, I add, a form consonant with one's own time.

For richness, overtones, relationships with other ages and conditions

must be discovered about the bare structure of the day—a universal interrelationship.

Without a basic new structure, however, all these devices are fruitless to arrest, enlighten or move us.

Notes: (10)

Dartmouth Talk
Part I

Formal reading for 10 or 15 minutes.

Part II

Informal reading of poems with comments—as illustration of Part I: metrical form.

Part III

Concluding remarks: on what has been discovered touching form. What it is probably like.

"Writing as an aid to thought"
Composition

> Now is the winter of our discontent
> Made glorious summer by this Son of York
> And all the clouds that lower'd about our house
> In the deep bosom of the ocean buried. [3]

Now is the winter of our *discontent*. Notice that word. Bear it in mind a moment. The purpose, in composition, the act, of meter and to a lesser extent rhyme is to force the mind out of its stasis, to let go, to loose the faculties—

to a resourcefulness in the search for the distinguished word—

to complete the *sound* and at the same time fill the sense. This is the virtue of the master at his highest. Without it there never could have

been such a phrase as "incarnadine the multitudinous deep."

(Such a phrase was compelled, in its precise form, by the meter which, with with a requirement of sense and intensity of proportion, emotional contour—had *first* to satisfy the sound. So with the word, "discontent.")

It is to let go and let the filled library of the mind open its books.

Look at the psychobiology of it (Noyes) the conscious mind is servant to the instinctive urges which are life's chief driving force—its function largely selective and inhibitive, while to a small degree only is it creative.

Now, the dangers to the neophyte.

How, in God's name, are we to write in the compelling meters of Shakespeare and expect our minds, less resourceful, we presume, than his, to find *more* resources in the language than he did? We are only plaster casts of him.

(Why even in the phrase quoted at the beginning he starts with an inversion, definitely forbidden us except at a cost, but to which he was, to use those words, *forced* by the meter to resort to. His times permitted it, ours do not. But we are expected to exceed him, to do what he could not do. And again in the fourth line he inverts his phrase in order to bring in the word *buried* at the end of the line. But the very choice of the word *discontent*, to complete the line within the meter, shows the strain. A better word might have been chosen if it hadn't been for that. "Now is the winter of our..." Well, what? Is it discontent, is that all? "All the clouds that lower'd about our house" means something more than discontent. Anger, fury, disappointment, bitterness—there are fifty words that might have been chosen. But discontent fills the line perfectly. Discontent *is* the word. The meter compels it and the language supplies it.)

We must discover our own form and our own meter, our own formal necessity, if in our day we are to repeat his process and let our new

form operate on our minds as his did.

Do not forget the lines, "the poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling glances from earth to heaven and bodies forth the shapes of things unseen." It is important less in itself than as a hint as to the poet's habit of composition, the loosing of the unconscious.

Take rhyme, the worst bugbear. Rhyme precisely the same as meter forces the conscious among the subconscious shelves. *If we are able*. Shakespeare couldn't manage it using the language of his place and day in a long sequence and abandoned it early. He couldn't use it and get what he wanted to into the lines. Only when he wanted to give an impression of the archaic as in the Players' lines in Hamlet did he abandon his "modern" method.

But if rhyme and rhyme forms have been rendered static centuries ago by their limited availability in English and consequent overuse, what will the effect be of these terrifying hammers?

Rhyme will not force the resources of the language and of the mind, it breaks them. Trying to do the impossible we maim our writing, fall into distorted phrases, redundancies, modes with unconsciously archaic significances, blanks, emptinesses—the whole field breaks down and we fall into sonnets: not realizing what a meaning has been imposed upon us before we begin to write.

If Shakespeare because of his nearness to the middle ages could invert and torture his phrase with impunity we *cannot* do so. We *cannot* do it, the intellectual conditions of our age forbid it.

The sonnet is no form to loosen our capabilities but a plaster cast to cripple all that is most creative, all that is potentially best in us. Even Shakespeare did not attempt to write one as we do.

There are two classes of poetry: major and minor. The minor blows into a used mold. The major creates the new mold of his day—or brings it to its fullest flower, as Shakespeare english blank verse—the iambic pentameter, Villon the polite ballade of his day and Dante the

sonnet. After use by such summative masters the form is largely dead. It has been taken!

"Form" here is used in the broadest, most comprehensive sense. I am well aware and conscious of not always using the term in that way but of speaking of metrical form only. (I am well aware that I have used the term *form* in two senses: metrical form and form in the full sense).

However the metrical form of the verse must always be the bones of a complete work. So a new metrical form will be the basis for the fullest development of any new work. The complete definition of form must await the performance.

Minimally it must be consonant—*con-sonant*—with our age and the range of our physical understanding. It must sound with our age and sound new and vigorously. Speaking a language which is as different in pace and modulation as ours is from English we should be aware more than others of pending changes in the verse forms. When we have projected it, then and then only can we trust our minds to be led into the new word associations which the new form will induce.

Thus the form becomes the basis of the meaning, truly tuned and not off key to our knowledge—when all the music in the world will not make it right.

We know that verse has made one great technical shift in the change from quantity to stress. It may take another.

These things illustrate what I MEAN by composition as an aid to thought.

The form compels the mind to invent but the major job of the writer is to make a form—flexible but imperious—that will give with the words generously but force the choice to compel its pattern. This is our business, the serious business of the poet.

And that form must be discovered in our speech. Not otherwise. Dis-

covered. My part has been to listen and try from what I hear to choose the parts of such a form. That I haven't succeeded doesn't bother me greatly.

A structural change, a change in the poetic foot, is the likely outcome to be expected.

What follows is an exhibition of the efforts I have been put to to map and use—for these things are inseparable—a form to compel my age.

Puerto Rico Talk (April 16, 1941)

1. A statement as to the modern basis of poetic form (informal).
2. Read some illustrative verses.
3. Spanish (Portugese) and American-English. Our profitable interrelationship in developing a new poetic form: EXAMPLE—Lope de Vega vs Shakespeare as a model (form) for America: What we might profit etc etc

* * * *

Preamble

The difficulty is to keep such a talk as this informal.

After all, there is no great point at issue. We are here for the most part to look at each other, to recognize in each other—that curious complexity called a writer, to encourage and to learn. But most to try to find a means, through the art which we practice, to communicate with each other—for what may come of it.

Part I

The study of poetry is based still largely on metaphysical criteria. This makes for as many approaches to any given poem as there are schools or attitudes of thought in the world.

This richness may have its rewards but it is likely to cause a great con-

fusion in the mind of the student. What should be our basic attitude toward a poem, any poem, there, lying on the page? Is it acceptable, repellent? Is it a work of art or a sub-mental impertinence or both?

Upon what shall a judgement be based? If we can get to that we can get to something we can understand together.

A beginning is made toward a clarification among this swarming mixture of approaches by cutting across all categories and declaring flatly:

Every poem either is or is not related to the structural character of its own age. Then I would go on to say: that unless a poem is so related it has lost its primary opportunity and significance.

Drop that there and let me make another statement:

The arts are really the history of the mind. If they are cramped or inadequate the mind will be found to have been deformed—as much so as were the feet of Chinese women, formerly, to indicate their aristocracy.

Thus we have two statements—the poem is or is not related to the structural character of its own age *and* the poem in itself constitutes the history of the mind.

To carry the argument still further let me insist that the poem presents the history of the mind in any age primarily by its structure—which, if the poem is to matter at all, will represent in some particular the true structure of that age which produces it.

What we need in verse today is a great technician.

We need one who can *hear* the "normal" language and who knows the patterns of the past to forget them. Then to invent, that is, to rediscover in the vernacular about him, as a fresh insight, the simple elements that, also, made up the old rigidities—and reintegrate them among the living material into adequate modern forms expansive enough to include the whole armamentarium of the mind as we know it today, forms uncramped, unclipped, uncompressed *structurally* into

those past "aristocracies" which are today damnable in their deforming limitations.

The language is the thing. The language must not be deformed to fit the pattern of the verse. The verse must be transformed to fit the exigencies of the language.

By debased rigidities of pattern, if we are not careful, our vehicle of communication, our language, will be falsified and if in its structure, you may be sure in its meaning also. We are likely to be made to say what we do not intend and to come off brutalized thereby.

Let us remember, the elements of composition are always free and available—*if* we have the genius to find them; it is only in their outworn entanglements of past usage that they tyrannize over us and need breaking down and *not* in their essence.

The cleansing and rehabilitation of the language gives the poet much of his seriousness of purpose facing the world.

* * * * *

So, before reading a few poems by way of illustration—let me go back a moment for emphasis, here and there, and the elaboration of one or two points:

1. There are many ways of looking at a poem, all of them misleading unless founded upon structure.

2. A poem is a use of *words* (as emphasized by Gertrude Stein) which when taken with the *structure* together comprise its form—the elements of form being: the *line* (What is it to be?) and the *word,* its selection, position and sequence in the line.

But now something extraordinary takes place—which is the essence of poetry: the form achieved, becomes itself a "word," the most significant of all, that dominates every other word in the poem.

Note:

Imagism, which had a use in focusing the attention upon the importance of concrete imagery in the poem, lost its place finally because as a form it completely lacked structural necessity. The image served for everything, so that the structure, a weaker and weaker free verse, degenerated finally into a condition very nearly resembling in meaninglessness that of the sonnet.

The "objectivists" attempted to remedy this fault by fusing with each image a form in its own right—but there were few successes—or have been few so far.

The *structural approach* has two phases, the first, the selection of forms from poems already achieved, to restuff them with metaphysical and other matter, and, the second, to parallel the inventive impetus of other times with structural concepts derived from our own day.

The first is *weak* and the second *strong*.

Note:

This does not imply that the men who take the positions one way or the other are either weak or strong. The thing to remember is that weak and strong are *both* phases of the structural approach.

The *weak* approach (to the intricacies of poetic form) is typified by the teaching attitude. Teaching—that is, the academy—is predominantly weak in this respect. It can't be otherwise and this, in fact, is its strength. It is the throne of precedent. But because of this it tends to arrogate to itself, mistakenly, prerogatives which sometimes it does not deserve.

The *strong* approach—made through the vernacular by attention to its modulated character, inventing from that—is relegated too often to the services of outlaws. Over long periods the weak approach tends to culminate in the strong, establishing the peaks of literature.

Note:

The validity of this entire proposal (that structure is of such pre-eminent importance in a poem) has been questioned, by the academy, the point being raised that Villon did not invent but took over the ballade, a form hackneyed by court use in his day, almost a popular game. But Villon dignified it to such a powerful advantage that his use of it constitutes it itself a unique meaning, an excellent example of just that strong approach through the vernacular which I wish to show. New concepts will always call for new forms and new forms demand new structures. The basis of new poetic forms will always be the language of that age which demands of them its fullest expression.

* * * * *

In hearing the following poems please remember that modern poetry is not selective—as poetry in the past has been. It is inclusive and comprehensive by its definition: to raise or enlarge the imagination to new areas of understanding. It says nothing of what shall be admitted. Nothing is excluded. How can it be? Every conceivable thing is material for poetry under the structural definition.

Part II:

Read, especially:

p 153/ All the Fancy Things
p 155/ Brilliant Sad Sun
p 230/ Adam & Eve
p 290/ The Flower
p 248/ Cancion
p 122/ Elsie

Part III:

If, in a work of art, it is by the nascent form that the fullest and most timely significance is expressed—what function might not Latin

America exercise toward the United States and Canada in this respect? To introduce us to Spanish and Portuguese literature—pure and simple. And if to that literature, to make us familiar with its forms as contrasted with our own.

For instance: *What* influence can Spanish have on us who speak a derivative of English in North America? To shake us free for a reconsideration of the poetic line.

You can suggest to us that we are not English. That the Elizabethan triumphs, except for their magnificence, concern us not at all. That is, in their formal quality they do not concern us.

Specifically, by showing us a shorter, four-stressed line rather than the pentameter; by showing us a great dramatic talent, Lope de Vega, who did not use the iambic pentameter—gave that hint which will tend to free us to our own uses.

For in many ways 16th and 17th century Spain and Spaniards are nearer to us in the U.S. today than, perhaps, England ever was. It is a point worth at least taking under consideration. We in the United States are climactically as by latitude and weather much nearer Spain than England, as also in the volatility of our spirits, in racial mixture—much more like Gothic and Moorish Spain.

Even more specifically, we have a problem before us in the U.S. to find a verse that form that will be suitable for the theatre. We know it can never be blank verse. It may very well be that hints from the romancero or at least Lope's shorter, swifter line will finally discover something more acceptable to our temperament, manner of thought and speech.

We know what we should have but we don't know how to get it. We know what we should do but we don't know how to do it. It looks as though our salvation may come not from within ourselves but from the outside.

And if everything else that I have said is wrong-headed, destructive to

that precious soul of things which the true poet should cherish! If I have been mechanical and crass in my concepts, relying for my argument on mere techniques and materials—Well, in that case, from the old and alien soul of America itself, may the reliques of its ancient, its pre-Columbian cultures still kindle something in me that will be elevated, profound and common to us all, Americans. There is that path still open to us.

* * * *

To read

1) All, is impossible
2) A miscellany is meaningless
3) To follow a theme is the alternative.

Obviously, the best theme is the most pertinent to the times:

The Structural Approach to Modern Verse.

The old order changeth! The basis of this change is economic—as Christianity itself comes of an economic basis:

chastity.

Bread Loaf: Aug. 23/41 (Bread Loaf Writers' Conference)[4]

1) One night shortly after my father died I saw him open a door above a narrow stairway and start to come down—etc.[5]

2) To write is to place words significantly together, one following the other, upon paper.

3) We are all seeking a solution—let it go at that. Some of us are seeking it through writing.

4) Not, mind you, that we have a solution which we want to jot down: or is *that* mostly what is intended? The solution we seek will be in the writing.

5) Thus we begin to speak of the writing as something separate from

the thoughts we wish to record or transmit. Thus we begin to speak of poetry.

6) Each writing in itself assumes a form. It is this form which, as writing, gives it its special character.

7) This form may be borrowed or invented, within limits and as it is borrowed or invented a poet grows to be of first or second rating.

8) The form is in itself a word. etc.

9) My conviction is that today the surpassing requirement would be a new measure.

10) This would be a solution. The enlargement of ideas and opportunity will follow. A wise man will look for it in his own department of thought and work for it is intrinsic everywhere.

11) Thus we may find it in verse as in chemistry—and if it is valid in one it is likely to be valid in the other. So we find ourselves integrated among others of our kind and times—fascinated and enkindled by their discoveries and forewarned by their mistakes.

What are we doing here at such an errand as a writers conference and such an occasion as a lecture on poetry at such a time? How can we say that writing, especially poetry, exists *in vacuo*, separate from its time? Are we here for escape? Certainly not. Oh no! We are here, perhaps in contrast to the times, to say things concerning basic values of the world now being belied: to speak boldly.

Not at all.

We are here to do, to make, to build into the craft a structure for survival—that shall be able to resist lies.

Let me read a little, talk a little, read a little talk a little—so we shall pass the hour together I hope at least to your entertainment.
My general topic is—(The Structural Approach to Modern Poetry?)—it sounds dry enough, in all conscience—but so it flows by with which we make bread... and cakes!

Vassar Talk:

The Structural Approach to an Understanding of Form in Modern Verse. (February 10, 1942).

My more particular theme is this: You see in American verse, especially in the modern phase, a struggle to establish itself *formally* among the literatures of the world.

That is to say, in America we have been seeking a form which will be characteristic of us and to establish it as our own.

But we have encountered a difficulty at the beginning: the language!

Our language is not taught in our schools. All our colleges teach only English: see Mencken's *The American Language*.

So that our best searches for formal elements in the vernacular have been outlaw.

You understand what I am saying? The best modern poets, to my thinking, will be those who seek in the vernacular for that with which to construct their verses: That is, to build into the body of their verse the formal elements of the speech which they *hear* about them, uniquely significant in its day.

For holding and following concepts of this nature I have found myself accused of many sins
(1) disorganization in my work
(2) of lack of intellectual content
(3) and finally of being a menace to the American campus!

What we were up against in 1902 to '05 was a body poetic—romantic for the most part and almost absolutely fixed.

There were certain topics as there were certain objects proper to employ in a poem and there were certain objects and certain topics which one was not to use.

Every line began with a capital and the sonnet was the dominant form.

We were very sure of what we wanted to do in and about the U. of Pa. in those days.

We proposed, simply, to make over the entire body of American poetry—on structural lines. Oh, we didn't say it to ourselves in so many words but that is what it amounted to.

The word, the line, no unnecessary word, the word as an object. Those were some of the things we discussed. Ezra Pound was a leader.

Our excursions took us often to the astronomical observatory in Upper Darby where H.D. lived among her extraordinary family.

The first verses I shall read are strongly influenced by this period.[6]

Vassar List: Postlude, Portent, Con Brio, A Coronal, Sub Terra, Spring Song, Pastoral, (from *The Broken Span*: Sparrows Among Dry Leaves). A Prelude, Good Night, Spring Strains, LoveSong, Primrose, To a Friend Concerning Several Ladies, Widow's Lament in Springtime, Spring and All, The Bull, The Jungle, The Red Lily, The House, Rain, The Botticellian Trees. An Early Martyr, Late for Summer Weather, Proletarian Portrait, The Yachts, The Dead Baby, To a Wood Thrush, Young Woman at a Window, The Term, Advent of Today, The Poor, Middle, These. (From *The Broken Span:* Last Words of My English Grandmother, Raleigh was Right).

(Breathing Spell)

What about form and free verse?

I have said in the past that there is really no such thing as free verse. Of late I have reconsidered that to explain that what is known as free

verse is the transitional characteristic—as much in Whitman as in any other—of verse forms passing from one culture to another.

It is verse seeking a new form, verse that is breaking away from old paralyzing restrictions that have grown about it from a language custom that is not necessarily regressive but that has already utilized its always limited poetic opportunities to the full—its mechanical linguistic opportunities I mean to say.

Free verse, therefore, so called, is a sign of change—not toward looseness, really, but toward—a reworking of the materials under new conditions for an increased amplitude of opportunity, greater, more varied expression to suit a more complex time. At least our time, here.

We must make new forms if we are to live—if we are to have anything *to return to* after the international adventure of war. New forms, if we do not wish to die of ennui and loneliness. It is the imagination that creates all that we see and all that we are. This is not figurative speech, this is cold truth. Poets are its journeymen.

The poet of consequence employs the *formal* (there's that word again) the formal opportunities of his vernacular, when he is on the make—hasn't it always been so?—to *form* his new realization of the time he lives—the only real time he will ever know—its character and its amplified significance as contrasted with former times.

Now you begin to see what a poet *means*, what his form means and why he must be continually working at it, making it.

It is the formal qualities of verse, in the best sense, that we have been concerned with so far. The word loses its significance almost entirely when we begin to speak of the formal literature of an epoch—What a transition!—and say finally that it has become formalized. What a come down.

This is what we teach!

My conception of the last two decades of modern American verse has been that of a verse seeking new adjustments to a new world—perhaps its final fruition or failure depends on the entire social-democratic survival or collapse.

Nothing lives in a vacuum.

The basic criterion, as pointed out by others, before which everything in a democracy must stand or fall is this: is it for or against the people. Modern American verse must survive or perish as it succeeds or fails in discovering new and comprehensive forms in the language of the people, the American language with its characteristic pace and structural character.

the failure of *Imagism*—if there is time.
Objectivism, what it intends.
Surrealism—a mode of composition.

Notes

1. This notebook is now in the William Carlos Williams Collection (Collection of American Literature) at the Beinecke, Yale University, and is published here with the kind permission of Yale and New Directions.

2. The early notes for the Dartmouth Talk (very close to those published here) are in the Williams Collection at Kent State.

3. Williams quotes here the opening lines of Shakespeare's *Richard III*.

4. Williams added these notes for the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in pencil, apparently shortly before giving his talk.

5. The story Williams is thinking of here and which he would have expanded upon in the talk itself refers to the dream he had about his father shortly after his father's death on Christmas Day, 1918. There are several versions, but in the *Autobiography* Williams writes (p. 14):

I'll never forget the dream I had a few days after he died, after a wasting illness, on Christmas Day, 1918. I saw him coming down a peculiar flight of exposed steps, steps I have since identified as those before the dais of Pontius Pilate in some well-known painting. But this was in a New York office building, Pop's office. He was bare-headed and had some business letters in his hand on which he was concentrating as he descended. I noticed him and with joy cried out, " Pop! So, you're *not* dead!" But he only looked up at me over his right shoulder and commented severely, "You know all that poetry you're writing. Well, it's no good." I was left speechless and woke trembling. I have never dreamed of him since.

Williams may well have been thinking of Frost and the academy's rejection of him in telling this story.

6. These dates are much too early for the period of ferment Williams is speaking of here. From 1902 to 1906, when he was at Penn, Williams was writing very traditional, very derivative stuff. Pound's insistence on "no unnecessary word" belongs to the Imagist period, some five to six years *after* Williams left the University. The verses Williams read from first here come from *The Tempers* (1913) and *Al Que Quiere!* (1917).

△

Ed Kaplan

A Confusion of People Inside

to lay hold twice
of the bolt
a man may loosen in his rage
which others
pick at
no break changes forth
nor are we terrified at
its ancientness
which the local madman
with his pomegranate brain
unblotted in the luncheonette this morning

an Armenian with ecstasy eyes
sea shells crabgrass
wronged he said
having lost fifteen cents for Swiss cheeze
on Friday's sandwich which never appeared with the ham
and in a voice unnailed with contempt

heads turned old explosions ripped silently in the air
an unknown figure which is in them tears skillfully as he
to run down their spines like snakes
opposite to their natures now as jugglers
looks the proprietor in his eyes where dogs can't read
says "You owe me some change You owe me $.15 for that sandwich
It didn't have the cheeze on it"

what the owner wanted to do was dream this painful stupidity under

there was an emperor once who didn't have to argue his bias with
anyone it was sunlight if he said it was

men whose fiddle was a force of nature

the mad Armenian wielded a knife which was consulted & unconcealed
inside his imagination which showed and which was feared

the proprietor did not believe his story
but that was beside the point
he was pickled in his own defence
"Take the money & don't come back"

to which the warlock threw the coins & stormed out

while customers over coffee & cigarettes
predicted the unpredictable it might have meant

"he'll be back" they put words into clay
"he's crazy" they said passing the pepper

he was found on their doorsteps fullgrown
he is them jungled hurt and a king
he is all americans who remember steam engines
he is writing a sonnet outside the bank
he is their grandfather's muscles & back & sweat
he is seen sometimes without shoes
eating a sandwich
on the curb
in their suburb
with no shirt on

they want his green horns off
they want the chaste static
the surrogate shadow
the roof and the lawn
the new boiler

they want to know nothing returns from the grave
nor be reminded it will

△

Valediction Capricen

The hope chest was filled with matches and
cortisone and wallets
Gum and old voices, deferred dejections,
probable hope,
Lightly bound copies of hopelessness, too,
and circling hoots
From your lips beyond the diorama: weeds
welded together.
One branch is a jungle, one white dress
Of the bright tree veracity as the sparrow
fastened to a twig
How we apples swam, quietly,
amicably
And now more than misrepresent, dirty
time you covered with paint.

What Diomede is to the District of
Columbia
Or the Dnieper of the submerged
sandbank, so I to you tonight
Unsteady now from the triple effects
of standing tiptoe in death
Like the highest point of a tirade,
as air drains and birds alone
are given knowledge
It was the future impressed on a

handkerchief
The way Christ had a legendary
cloth
Those were the harmless nights of
phrases
You in your slip like a monk in quoins
of stone: a blank leaf of inter-
leaf

The unmerciful battering of your heart
in my hand
Like the hands of fanatics destroying the
classic beautiful faces
Because seen now as faithless being:
portrait of the wind,
Your hair falls like an inventory on
your breast
Fine, in what sense fine? Hmm?
Cut to death by mob action with legal
sanction
Like the lyre of Orpheus and Mercury
containing Vega
A sexually inviting throw of the dice
An animated cartoon of Paradise
A pastel jealousy of unusual
depth
The lustre of one's confinement
The death of a young woman here rests
on a couch

Holidays and congresses, planets and groups
of stars,
Spain and the Citizen King

Creeds and confessions
Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of
the world—Capitalize all these.
I love you and the sun used as a saddle
for women
In which the rider sits with her legs
on the same side of the sun
And the sunrays split their sides
And pedestrians cannot tickle themselves
for fear of fainting in the filaments
Of that heat Oh slender worm
You are liable and I pay tribute
A leopard in a leotard in an Asia once I
saw
It was an African one with buff black spots
and on that leotard were scurfy
scales

But you have been removed like a bugle
in a drum
And I speak ineptly like a not so robust
bee with hair
Cheerful, the middle part of a sail
Though a sail summoned to appear
before court
Heaven becomes you
Ill as a token in a jet
Hat in hand you strolled the buildings
Big and forbidden and fern-like you
fall
It's an odd sight I don't have of you
tonight:
The red pen lies near the red Sphinx

The sky is covered like a tent for
animal acts, the comb is silent
No word from the radiant white business
paper as of yet
Nympholepsy, hateful word
That wave about to break in thick
paint was the dud
But what about the wave before it
the ghostly precursor
That was before you discovered jealousy
in the dictionary

With a silver green dust of war in your
hair
As twilight fills me up or is it
midnight now sickened
Like an old story dunked into that
silver green dust
Inextricably bound like Hoffmansthal
and Richard Strauss
A silver brain in a silver ashtray
The rests are coming faster now
And sleep uncropped comes longing to be
firmly fixed
And that is pine tar and fossils to you
The rising again to life of all my
human dead
Shrouds from a ship's mast a clement ship
But the fruit has turned to rind
I cut you off and dress for burial

Unaccommodated man without an
umbrella

Is an umbrella radiating from the
weather itself
With a largely gelatinous
structure if of storms
The umbrella forms the chief part
of the body like the mind in a
barrage
You cannot see what chords play
on this disc
A branch of physical theory: diamond
shaped in sorrow
The side of the horse's hoof which
does not kill
The playing time of some games is
divided the clement ship
Sweetest love, we are like the
typewriter and the eraser fluid
Not the lexical meanings but
like altus, high and low
Dolly Madison is an ice cream now
and then: a garden
No suspects, no motives, no
weapons
The water juts into the water
Not to know that pretty doesn't mean
small that allegro means happy

The double negative like double-
jointedness
Forming your name or a part of your
name
Like a secret wine poured out in
sleeping rooms
You lie like a coat of arms in my

arms
Gurgling, to make a sound like that
The girlfriend of a gangster, small and
slimy and elongate
Evergreens were creeping over New
Jersey
La capricieuse like the twenty-forth
caprice
Rarely if ever have there been such
castles on stamps
Such harbors on a postcard
You harbor me emphasizing the a priori
conditions
Taking the old paint off like moss on
brick

The caprices slender as a woman's
waist—you tremble
Holidays and congresses, planets
and groups of stars
Your name or parts of your name—
Capitalize these.
the water jutted into the water
like a penis
The tapered part of a wave
painting
Converted into air, into fresh
air—
Syllables inserted to fill a
vacancy as *it* in *it was easy to*
say
It does not keep the audience from
seeing into things: the

immaterial pyramid of
those desires
You in your variable silk of
deep purplish blue
Converted into air, into fresh air—
Floating toward the person who had
fallen into it.

△

NORA JAFFE

FOUR SILVERPOINT DRAWINGS

Sunshine's Ear #3, 1981

Sunshine's Ear #4, 1981

Horizontal Spinework, 1981

Exposed Root System, 1981

Back

Everyone fragile.

So if I step out of bounds,
wear the wrong clothes for the wrong day,
say the word dreaded from some trauma
from some past I never knew —
all would shatter.

Shattered, then, the enormity of the loss,
that we could lose all we banked on,
this placed, the calm horizon of years,
contracts beyond what any law could word...

we retrench, grapple back, where such sweetness,
such forgiveness lies, as if the tethered animal
must always test its chain to love the shade
of the tree it's tied to, or that bravery
in such matters can be foolish and cowardice
wise.

And so, why not blame the stars, some excuse
beyond ourselves, for this unfortunate experiment,
toes trying the waters of hopelessness and finding
the temperature extreme.

And welcome back this love we sacrifice our 'false'
needs to, on some altar that allows what air we breathe
to be less desperate than alone.

Concert

The crowd crowds in.
And organic imperialism fills
the further reaches, quells
undisturbed space. Silence
blots the quotidian minutiae
of meaningless breath.
Lights dim, the stars out.

The cornball phrases:
Music of Spheres.
Heights of Parnassus.
Depths of Hell.
No baby face ever been to both
& reached home unscarred.

This communal voyage, touch-offs
to dreams. Concentrate, then float.
Pay for the Absence. Weed
the week away from all systems.
Pay for the Absence.

Then Lights give Gravity
admittance, voices wake
those awash. Another time
to walk out of another time.
Outside, Difference is the comfort,
Sameness the home we're driving to.

History of the Great Poem

It was nothing fancy,
this poem I made up,
turned over & over
in my mind — a drawknife
moving towards heartwood.

And then I thought
of its genesis, the innocent
happenstance of its perception,
the words on my lips
before I thought them.

I could see its great future,
smiles of recognition
on the faces of those who heard it,
passed along to others
like a home remedy to cure
the blues.

And then my sudden fame, and
then beyond, the poem a folksong
sung by schoolchildren, its author
forgotten, its words unfixed, uprooted
by time, a singer's memory.

Then, protean, its essence hackneyed

by lesser imitations, newer versions;
ridiculed, buried, waiting for a
future to rediscover its humble
beginnings, its purity.

— Two days later, after the clarity
of this first shoot of Spring,
I realize I can't remember the poem,
its words nor matter, and this landscape,
moving in an unending scroll, fades into
an unborn nothing.

△

Summer

Translated from the Russian
by Mark Rudman

It brought an entourage of thirst,
stingers, butterflies, and stains,
weaving tapestries from its memory
of mayflower, mint, and honey.

Not the ticking of clocks
but the day-long jangle of chains
pierced the air with drowsy thorns
and cast a spell on the weather.

It happened—the sunset,
tired of games, passed
dominion over the kitchen garden
to cicadas, stars, and trees.

The moon shed beams, not shadows,
and disappeared without a sound,
while quietly the night rippled
from cloud to cloud.

More from dreams than from eaves,
more absent minded than timid,
the light rain shuffled at the door

and smelled of wine-cork.

That's how the dust smelled. And the weeds.
And once you got the point,
that's how the gentry's decrees smelled:
of brotherhood, equality.

They installed councils in the provinces.
Did you, friend, cast your lot with them?
Days glittered in the sorrel,
and smelled of wine-cork.

Postscript

No, I wasn't the source of your grief.
I didn't beg my country's oblivion.
The sun burned on drops of ink
like clusters of dusty currants.

Cochineal spread through the blood
of every thought I had and word I wrote.
I didn't cause that wormy redness.
No, I wasn't the source of your grief.

It was the evening molded out of the dust
that kissed you, choking in ochre pollen.
It was shadows taking your pulse; it was you
turning your face toward the fields
that burned, swimming on the hinges of gates
flooded with dusk, ashes and poppies.

It was the whole summer in a blaze of pods
and labels and sun-bleached luggage
sealing the wanderer's breast with wax,
setting your hats and dresses on fire.

It was your eyelashes glued by the sun,
it was that savage disk butting its horns
against walls, flattening fences.
It was the carbuncular sunset humming in your hair,
perishing there for half an hour,
shaking the purple off marigolds and raspberries.
No, it wasn't my love, but your loveliness.

Sandra Braman

Recess

"Aren't we glad we got here, early?" we said, driving across the basin, diving board in the back seat, top down, waiting, for the water to come and fill us, fill the basin. This day is just like any other, we might go to war, the walls of the basin cracking where we've never been, diving with boats on, in a strange place. "But what could be stranger than this," to hear you, or the others, tell it.

We drive, in a small Triumph. It is alkaline and we position the wind ourselves. Your left hand is on the driving wheel; your right my thigh, my hair. Occasionally, we turn. Often, I turn, touching the diving board, feeling its wobble. The board brinks our movement, enhances direction. I am concerned about its disappearance, it is pine, and replaceable.

It is quite dry. With passionate attention the dust that is smaller than sand, the dust that is smaller than sand, settles our folds, membranes the length, the breadth, of the board.

To our surprise, like Kansas, a road crosses ours that spun in back dives off an evaporating map.

"Looking for perseverance?" the other, driver said. "This is still the West, and you're placed in it, hang on, we mythologize." I turned myself, and consulted the water fable. The diving board sang loudly, at rest. I put one hand on it and with the other took that loop curved in to steady us.

Both hands on the wheel, you shook his eyes with, determination. The rock between our cars, a sign, sat the floor behind your seat now in a western pace. No reins.

Our random intention comes, without lineage, with a detectable Spanish moisture. Rims of the past follow us like eyes across the valley floor. Occasionally, moments of solitude rise millions of years, in hues, and we must swerve. This is not impatience.

All night we had, listened to the river flowing through our mouths. The measure of displacement blew my hair back, offering a larger surface for your hand, a wind of possibility. We naturally, drive, small skeletons into bones to cover our own. It is not true this drive is endless, not for us. The horizon, is beginning, to trickle.

"But nothing hasn't happened yet," I consult the water tables. With my right hand, and with my left for steadiness, I place our moment on the page. Involving shoulders, a stance of relationships, breathing chance and mobility into my nervous, system.

We seek an edge. To this. We had tales, resting, on the base of our spines, leaning into memory. It would be spring, into site. Since stopping, you started now at speeds, rising and falling with the ocean's gestures flowing past our eyes where the wind cut through old time. Lime walls of the basin are far away. Our shadows return to us and dream. If there, we would rest, ourselves.

Your turning, engages, the basin now perfectly. We are pillars, without hands, steady. The skin of our bodies blows back six million years, holding its level. We are in a basin and it cracks with a great roar. Stories spray, maidens and youth, love and death, rescue, like a rainbow. We park below.

You take the board and I the rock, heavy, in my arms. It is dusty, from day, and has weight. We listened, well, the climb was easy. In the dark we placed, board against tree. Its base shook heat into moss; head tremored with cedar. The rock, waited, in leaves.

We remove. Dress. I pull the shirt over your head while you hold, your arms, in the air fingers open. You open, my skirt, from behind. Birds but no insects, and silence.

I cradle the rock against my belly. It is rough. You move your shoulders with beauty. You place the board carefully, assuming air within earth and without the rock holds your intention, to time, whose crevices, warm, our toes.

It walk, to the edge. Of the board. Of the diving board, as women always have done, bellies empty or full, first, with attention. I dive. You dive. We hit bottom.

△

Paul Blackburn

Twenty-Two Poems

Introduction

This group of previously unpublished poems is the first major selection of individual pieces from the large cache of Paul Blackburn manuscripts in the University of California, San Diego's Archive for New Poetry. Unpublished, uncollected poems have appeared since Blackburn's death, but no previous gathering has been based on a comprehensive survey of the recently established and indexed canon.

Less than one third of his approximately 1250 poems had been published when Blackburn died in September, 1971. A large portion of the later (1967-71) unpublished material was brought out in 1975 in *The Journals** and *Halfway Down the Coast*. More recently, *Against The Silences* (1980)* offered a wider time range with its selection of poems from the decade 1959-69, pieces taken from a larger group that Blackburn collected around his relationship with his second wife. These volumes, along with the small book *By Ear* (1979) and some scattered pieces in little magazines, brought the amount of published work to about one half of the total. Still, some ten years after Blackburn's death, over 600 poems remain unpublished. Perhaps 200 of them are juvenilia, technically proficient but often sentimental and derivative: there are poems, for example, in the styles of Robinson Jeffers, W.H. Auden—and of Blackburn's mother, the poet Frances Frost. There there are about 100 one-shot pieces, verse jotted and forgotten. This leaves some 300 mature and considered poems, arguably as good as any published during Blackburn's lifetime.

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*Posthumous publications of Blackburn's work have not always been accurate e.g., the large group of uncollected poems in *Sixpack 7/8* contains many textual errors; a number of poems were omitted from *The Journals*; and the title, "Against The Silences," was assigned by the editor to poems taken from a binder marked only "S." by Blackburn.

In the past year, Clayton Eshleman made a number of trips to the Archive for New Poetry, where I have been cataloguing and editing Paul Blackburn's collected poems. He went through hundreds of typescript drafts and holograph notebook pages in the Blackburn Archive. With the help of Caryl Eshleman, he then chose the pieces presented here from a preliminary group more than twice the size. I established chronology and provided definitive texts—in all cases Blackburn's final revised version—for the poems.

These pieces span almost the entire major period of Blackburn's poetic productivity; of the mature years only the first few in New York City (1950-54) and the final one in Cortland, New York, go unrepresented. "Marseille," "Mediterráneo: a littoral," and "Gypsies in Malaga, 1956" were written during Blackburn's first, three and a half stay in France and Spain, when he began work on what was to be a lifetime project of compiling and translating a volume of Provençal troubador verse. The next five poems, "The Melody Lingers on," "Dea . Dia : an aubade around the clock," "The Parallel Voyages," "Keeping It Up," and "Mestiza," were composed in 1958-59; they find Blackburn back in New York City during the dissolution of his first marriage. The poems in this group revolve around a transitional romance that is restorative but painful, in part because—life here imitating a convention of Blackburn's troubadors—the lady in question was married.

"Discourse on Values" and "Alley Oop Speaks" bring us into the early 1960s. With the poems "To a Friend" through "O Miles" (roughly 1963-67, the span of Blackburn's second marriage), they form a group most strongly linked by a consistent attention to sensory detail of both past and present experiences. "The Ghost" looks at the breakup of Blackburn's second marriage from the not-so-distant vantage point of almost a year and few thousand miles: In 1967-68 the poet was back in Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship. The final poem, "From A Parked Car," was written in New York City during Blackburn's third marriage, about a year before his death. With the exceptions of the discursive "Discourse on Values," the violent, hallucinatory ["Birds chirp listlessly in the heat"], and the short "From A Parked Car"—written in a period when Blackburn was almost exclusively writing long, untitled *Journals* pieces—the poems are fairly representative of the formal and thematic concerns of their respective periods.

A few comments on some individual pieces. "Dea . Dia : an aubade around the clock" is, as Blackburn noted, a reworking of the Lorca poems,

"Cancion Del Día Que Se Va." Blackburn's disclaimer, "adapted and perceptively enlarged," allowed him to work here without the dual constraints he felt during this period: the barrier of rather rigid limits set by the Lorca estate on translations, and the fear of being criticized for taking undue license (a charge he had encountered with some of his Provençal translations). Here is the Lorca original:

Cancion Del Día Que Se Va

¡Qué trabajo me cuesta
dejarte marchar, día!
Te vas lleno de mí,
vuelves sin conocerme.
¡Qué trabajo me cuesta
debar sobre tu pecho
posibles realidades
de imposibles minutos!

En la tarde, un Perseo
te lima las cadenas,
y huyes sobre los montes
hiriéndote los pies.
No pueden seducirte
mi carne ni mi llanto,
ni los ríos en donde
duermes tu siesta de oro.

Desde Oriente a Occidente
llevo tu luz redonda.
Tu gran luz que sostiene
mi alma, en tensión aguda.
Desde Oriente a Occidente,
¡qué trabajo me cuesta
llevarte con tus pájaros
y tu brazos de viento!

The poetic critique "To a Friend" marked the culmination of a period of increasingly strained relations between Blackburn and the poet/editor Cid Corman. The somewhat tenuous re-establishment in the early 60s of what had been a strong friendship in the early to mid 50s was threatened, on Blackburn's side, by Corman's rejection of certain pieces he submitted to *origin*, second series. The event that directly precipitated the writing of the

poem was the publication of *origin* #8 in January, 1963. The issue opens with a polemical letter from Theodore Enslin, calling life in New York City "a reciprocal disease of parasites," and the city dwellers "invalids" who "have to stick together no matter how bad things get." Blackburn alone, identified as "P," is quoted as saying that Enslin had no defenses, to which Enslin countered, "No, and I had no intention of developing any." Blackburn's annoyance over Corman's sanctioning, even highlighting the letter by printing it on the magazine's inside front cover was exacerbated by the Corman poems that followed. Blackburn felt, as he wrote Corman in the May 1963 letter apologizing for this piece, "a kind of withholding and smug judgement in the poems, the limits of the commitment." In "To a Friend," Blackburn—as he put it in the same letter—uses Corman's words against him, in particular the words of his poem "The Offerings":

> Too many things on the altar.
>
> A petal would do.
>
> Or the ant that stops for a moment
> at it.

Blackburn also plays on Corman's lines, "Land / of gold cicadas" in "The Fortune," and the opening line, "It's quiet, almost too quiet," of "The House."

There is an allusion in the beginning of "M/S" to an event very much in the news at the time of the poem's composition but now perhaps obscure. On June 21, 1964, three civil rights activists, among them Michael Schwerner, were reported missing in Pennsylvania, Mississippi; they had gone to the south to agitate for a number of reforms, including voter registration of blacks. On the date mentioned in the poem, there was worry about their disappearance and fear of foul play by local opponents of integration. Three bodies were found in the area on August 4; they were identified the following day as being those of the civil rights workers.

A final note on the opening statement on poetics. Blackburn usually refrained from making pronouncements on aesthetics in general and on his own poetic practice. Early in his career he did discuss theory in his correspondence and frequently commented in his poems on the writing process. For the most part, however, he preferred an indirect espousal of values through

the work itself. The "Statement" presented here is the first and most effective section of a longer 1954 piece; it is one of the few prose summations of his poetry that Blackburn ever ventured. As he later put it in a February 4, 1961, letter to Robert Creeley:

> Re: "deep image;".... You know, I don't believe in any system whatsoever? All work, if you work 'em right, if you're good enuf to, whatever.... Even Charles [Olson] is a bit stuck with his own theory, which is out of EP/Williams plus his own drive and fusions. Just a limitation, no badness surely....
>
> Any set of rules or controls will serve you.... Anything in the world set next to anything else in the world will inform (or not) itself, the other. If you want to start a cult of juxtaposition, let's call it re-realism, I'm with you.
>
> But let's have for ourselves no greased slides, or any blurred centers. Ripeness is all.

—EDITH JAROLIM
Archive for New Poetry, 1982

△

Statement

My poetry may not be typically American, or at least in matter, not solely so: but I think it does make *use* of certain techniques which, even when not invented by American poets, find their particular exponents there in contemporary letters, from Pound & Doctor Williams, to younger writers like Paul Carroll or Duncan or Creeley.

> Techniques of juxtaposition.
> Techniques of speech rhythms,
> sometimes very intense,
> sometimes developed slowly as
> one would have
> conversation with a friend.

Personally, I affirm two things:

the possibility of warmth and contact in the human relationship :

as juxtaposed against the materialist pig of a technological world, where relationships are only "useful'," i.e., exploited, either psychologically or materially.

2o, the possibility of s o n g within that world: which is like saying 'yes' to sunlight.

On the matter of song: I believe there must be a return toward the musical structure in poetry, just as there must be, for certain people at least, the return to warmth within a relationship.

△

M a r s e i l l e

Walking through the Halles Delacroix
it is earsplitting
and one learns why certain adjectives
have been applied over the centuries
to fishwives

It is all perfectly true

In their dark aromatic dresses
and their black uncomely tresses
they lean over their aromatic wares
and scream

It is fabulous.

△

Mediterráneo: a litoral

I n t h e c a l m a f t e r 2 s t o r m s
t h e M e d i t e r r a -
n e a n,

that deep mirror of our profound doubts

tempestas tempestatarum, but

in calm, in circles of calm, are

slow currents, the rings of the sea.

Celebrate them.

Take the sun and set it

there in the rings

squash-color & violet.

Mirror of our profound thoughts,
mirror, color of our grapes,
caño de nuestros emociónes,
miroir approfondi des rêves,
YEAH, but
the exterior world is real, buddy,
insomuch as intelligence
makes it . animates it .
As our latter-day Confucius say: "Nothing counts
save the quality of the affection."

But I am here as
you are there.
But here.
HERE!
M e d i t e r r -
a n e a n . C E N T E R .
Center of
circles, center of
earth, center of warmth, center of
world, of which I am

c e n t e r

MEDITERRÁNEO,

mother and cradle both,

your quiet waters after storm.

Art is merest dullness.
Sure it is . Man
no end beyond himself
and take it so .

And if it is,
it is limitless, either

no, No, NO, no!
or
yes, Yes, YES, YES, Y E S !

n o t j u s t f e v e r e d p r o j e c t i o n f r o m t h e
p r o j e c t o r, m y

d e a r e x - f r i e n d .

Only the affection is real.

Let us recognize the ugliness between us
the rotted nuts of our skulls, holes half-filled with night
heaving messages full of our vicious fears
into the sea in bottles, trusting the tides,
the tides of commerce at least. Not even that
communication. To swim thru all the seas
collecting up the bottles? I leave
the detail to you . For myself,
I lived without lies
confident in my weakness
heroic in a way in the
corazón,
in the heart of the four elements . This is beauty, or
it is one way to live in its presence .
I was brother to any beast, friend of the stones, I
suppose we are all Orpheus if we would .

But the stone outside us is beauty
and the stone within us is love .
Both stones will break the teeth
or the foot.
Or the hand.
THERE IS NO OTHER WAY TO LIVE.

M e d i t e r r a n e a n, and the fall of these years,

years and waves, over the

centuries rolling up and breaking .

Now the wave swells, passes,

another behind it always

present,

present,

THE SEA IN ITS FULLNESS OF
MOVEMENT.

That is love .

△

Gipsies in Malaga, 1956 .

The walls blackened by old fires
Linen drying
Near the dry riverbed's mouth, from
underground wells,
a few pools of sweet water . for
cooking, for the wash .

Three young girls doing blouses
flirt with four young young men
who are themselves waiting
to do handkerchiefs
and underwear .
It is what is hidden is uppermost in their minds .
what the blouses cover, what stirs
under the young men's shorts . a washing place
is a very good place to flirt . who has
stained what where, very interesting,

very direct opening for conversations.
How they fill up the blouses
a real question . Mysterious
bulges under the trousers, real .
What a shame we have to wear clothes, the best thing about them
is in the washing of them . Bright sunlight .

Two sheets spread on the rocks
A man sleeps in his trousers while
his shirt dries on the bushes .
Having no wife or daughter,
it is not mended .

A mother with four children, all under five,
cooks with one on her arm .
Woodsmoke from the tripod, the
succulent, garlicy cooking of the poor .

Further down the smell of oil from a depot,
the smell of human excrement . Goats also
graze on the grass of the riverbed .
Fresh milk.
Husband of the woman cooking
sits quiet in the grass, stunned
under the bright sunlight,
stunned by his evil luck .

Smoke rises further down also
from under the railroad bridge .
Fire invisible in the sunlight .

Two women are washing clothes
a few feet from one another, there's

another conversation going, the
amusements, the sporting life of the poor .

A woman arrives from town,
a heavy bundle of bamboo poles
balanced on one hip .
The poles are not tied tight enuf and keep slipping.

The bright sunlight .
The goats grazing .

△

The Melody Lingers On

not that I want to be where I have been.
it is that I have knifed something in myself,
another life, a girl,
and can't see
why I should have to use the pronoun 'we'
ever again.

△

D e a . D i a : an aubade around the clock

DEA, Dia, goddess, day!
You march off into the wet darkness
full of me. I
am afraid that when you return you will not know me
And all my treasure given away!
How could I have left upon your breast possible
realities
of impossible minutes! Day Dea

Late afternoon
Perseus comes
files your chains
and you flee
over the mountains bruising your feet.
Not my tears or my flesh can seduce you.
Not even the river can hold you
where you sleep your golden siesta.

East to west
you raise round light, your globular light sustaining the tension of my soul at its sharpness
East to west
What work it costs me,
mi cielo,
waking you with your birds
and your arms in the wind!

Adapted and perceptibly enlarged from the *Cancion Del Día Que Se Va* by Federico Garcia Lorca

△

the parallel voyages

Knowing your schedule tonight is
no pleasure
2 people riding 2
Crosstown buses 9
blocks apart,
who should,

if the purity of this snowstorm is sign
my white-wrapped solitude seat-huddled staring
miserably through a mittened hole on the
steaming window at overcoated Utrillo-figures
hunched against the snow

always be together — no
more than hands'-length apart.

If I ride this mechanized tunnel wishing it were a horse
and I sitting straight up, scarfed to the eyes
with the warmth of your body behind me, laughter,
strength of arms wrapping my waist and somethings
softer pressed into my wing-bones, the natural
movements of the horse, our own, what is hard,
what is soft, the differentiation, if

after this medieval fantasy, after I've
gruffly gone over the ancient wisdoms like telling beads:
sit up, straighten your back, act like a
man as well as a lover, don't hunch like a judge on a bench
don't be the husband you aren't, let her go
and come wherever she wants, let her know
you care and are there when she wants, but don't
be a bore about it, do you think she is so insecure
she needs always to be in a passionate mood? Let it go
let it pass, kiss her hands and her feet and her ass
she deserves it and anywhere else you can get to, be
perfectly shameless in bed and the rest let go, and if
after this traditional lecture, I still

ride this bus thinking of you, & you
ride that lower one thinking of me, go ahead, make some remark
on the possible boredoms resulting from too much proximity?

△

Keeping it Up

La montaña canta

Well sure! & why not? I
rock some on that mountain when I wanta —

well, not exactly, & besides her husband's home
now, — and hell, one
observes the proprieties when absolutely necessary

besides,
according to today's phone call I am still
the only tall pine rising on that mountain
a single tree, no
spirituel winter-horror of bleak clutching branches
but a black jackpine, my needles ever green & firm
& surd, upholding offering to blue sky fine snow
high-piled, the wild
shakings of birds

Por eso, la montaña canta, como no?

All of this sounds very flip somehow
but the truth is, I think of you
& my big ears redden like any farmer's boy

& the seed stirs in my genitals as though
weeping with joy
in sight of soil

△

Mestiza

Among the myriad mysteries, myths,
frankincense and myrrh, muzzle-loaders, mills,
Midlothian midriffs, miles and mutton chops
(the ribs)
one finds
the fat trimmed and the velocity of a faintly luminous
band
the Milky Way, mimosa of the mind;
mis-
handled at least,
whatever misfeasance, misin-
terpretations, mesere-re — nobis, meu cantúria, bullshit :

Amid
the mime and mummery, the marls and mitigations
of mundane affairs, this warmth
let my try again, and harder this time please,
(call it a tour de force), my mode, your hands
mode, you dig, you my
Modigliani, fares mid
spells of underarm musky monkey flower turned to myth

The murmur of the summer sea against Murmansk

(or Queen Maud Land, Mawson, Macuarie Island,
McMurdo Air Facility, Mirny or Byrd, the other pole)

△

Discourse on Values

I sit listening, in memory,
to this man talk
of happiness, his
eyes glistening with a dream of simplicity

and I cannot help thinking
the paradox present
or even one sinking
side of his over-balance equation.

I too have stood high
on edge of wood
watching larks rise
and have not despised the sensation;

seen swallows' flight
weaving patterns of circles
over roofs at sunset
swing round the tower at the edge of night

and out and over
the darkening hour
of tiles, with a portion
of swinging, arrowlike motion, not unlike

the heart of a lover.
And stood still for
a bit on a hillcrest

looking out over a sea-misted sun-shot town

before going down
through terraces and olive
orchards to commit
some mundane act as buying a live

rabbit or jug
of black wine or cig-
arettes in a strange
language where much was imperfectly understood

and therefore beautiful.
Simplicity always is
a full measure of purity
whether the final result be a kindness

to the senses
or a brutality.
Happiness translated
into its nearest latin-based equivalent

is felicity
And felicity is,
— true to its gender,
a purely domestic item on the agenda

whereas happiness!
happiness can also be
experienced split-second in
a heightened restive flow of ecstasy

melting down your bones.

But tea and scones
at 4 in the afternoon
is a pleasure requiring time and contemplation

to appreciate. I engage
to show that one word,
lost to the reduction of
already debased protestant values in common usage

in english language
of this uxorious age
can, in all tenderness, bridge
the semantic problem posed by this young man

who sits enthralled
upon his can,
enthralling his audience
with simple beautiful words illustrating

without benefit of Freud,
via the equally loving
sensations of his groin,
his imbecile definitions of happiness.

The word is *joy*.
The distinction is medieval
and clear. The provençal
troubadours used it, naturally to excess.

Today, even in
out most conservative forms
of reference to sin,
we fairly blanket the whole experience in

some tangential form
of the affirmative *yes*.
Say we enjoin our sons,
daughters, wives, mistresses, friends, do we ever

admit even tacitly
certain of nature's ends
and say, implicitly
meaning it: "En*joy* yourselves!" ? No,

we mug instead, and grin:
"Have a good time, Jane!" or even
worse, and more tangential
because more opulent and vaguely overblown:

"Have a ball!" *I had*
a most enjoyable time is left
to Bronx schoolgirls writing
letters to their girlfriends at Antioch

or to old ladies
writing their sisters
in Kankakee, Illinois meaning
they had a nice talk with cousin Sadie in Binghamton.

Good Christ! Have 2 balls!
Joy is dead. The kiss,
once the highest rapport
and bliss that an adept might enjoy

as guerdon from his lady,
has been relegated
down to a very hip

and tasteless matter of preliminary.

The bloody core is this:
poor man has lost his
human ability to take
joy at all except in *arriere vue*.

He can no longer
differentiate between the
observed act and the strong
feeling he experiences in the presence of it,

a relationship
in fact so complicated, that he
has so little equipment to deal with it,
that he must name it "a simplicity". I am

speaking of myself here
and must confess
that I was the young man
in the earlier part of the poem who could

only say *yes* to some
vague blob of feeling
I'd simplified down and
accepted as a valid basis for song. No good,

and being wrong
never was easy for me.
And having to live in a
mid-twentieth century housewives heaven instead

of 700 years earlier

learning the total craft
with lute and viol
has not exactly made things that much easier

to translate into verse
my favorite century's (the 13th)'s
pain and JOY. It's time
I established my identity and squared completely

with the terms of
Love. Love, I submit
that your soft shaft
can touch the heart of it and pierce

the adjective,
dive direct to noun,
and keep the shown complexity
and endless terror even if the lady does not ask me

about form, direct,
I touch the kept
recognition of Joy, and
as such it defines my own circuitry.

Pity me, o
ye translators,
whose claim is form,
my cigarette is hot, my pants are only

warm from sitting
at these ancient books.
Shall make no quaint alloy,
My song's of JOY, I'll make it now, look

(You cannot hear)

△

Alley Oop Speaks

You small sick animal
Me big tender savage
You snarl and bite little bit
Me tender and calm you
You lick me grateful
We good friends

△

To a Friend

Dear Cid.

No.
Too many things on the altar?
No. There are
never too many things
on the altar. Sure, a
petal would do, your offering always
was a petal, and
does, say. But you
don't understand, there are
those who must bring more to the altar, or
more of those who must bring to the altar
you would say
too many,
things, too many things.
But the ant who stops for moment

at it
would also do, would,
as you do,
stop for a moment.

Anyone's,
yours, the
ant's
"somehow persist in it,"
(song)
is enuf
(as tho it were not known). We are
enuf to read you the rain,
pine cones, the gold cicadas, the silences,
but we you the
excess
a mesa at sunset with clouds
red . purple . green . blue .
colors of west you took as you went by,
the critic-editor, you
never knew
blue
never knew
green
never knew
purple, red, red
yes you knew, but never
golden cicadas, you say gold, making it short,
gold you never knew, you say . gold,
that short / "It's
quiet, almost too quiet"
gold you never knew,
GOLD
you never

(as tho it were not said)
knew.
You only collected it.

△

untitled

Birds chirp listlessly in the heat
The 6 A.M. of brooms on sidewalks
no traffic yet, wetting the
sidewalks down, sound of sweeping .
Young man sits in a puddle spattering
the filthy cool liquid over his face and arms,
muddies
himself.
He gesticulates an explanation for
everything
& laughs.

Down into the hell of the flesh.
Bottom of the subway steps beads of
sweat fall.
The flower huckster, his flowers scattered, is being dragged
south along the Bowery
by 3 space chicks in red dresses:
jerked along half-conscious by the legs :
black ragged trousers, shirt town, flapping,
face bloodied.
Their
hair is disheveled, they snigger among themselves.
His mother and his two sisters
will put out the lamp of day,
tear out his eyes and force him

to enter each of them singly,
mother first.

The two girls stand by giggling,
squeezing him lightly.
They knock out his teeth with a claw hammer
and he gums helplessly the black
watermelons.

He goes into his older sister
He vomits on the stone floor
Her head slides about in his vomit
Her mouth is open, the breathing heavy
Her legs up over his shoulders, she
swings her ass in closer sucking
in the long pink brother
Mother stands foresquare by the sink
washes her stinking armpits
scrubs her crotch clean, watches and
laughs . foresquare .
After his second purge . spreadeagled, the
three of them wash him tenderly
anoint his body with sweet oils,
preparing him,
cleaning the cuts
soothing the bruises, cauterize the
torn eye sockets and broken gums,
restoring him.
They let him sleep.

His younger sister takes his sex in her mouth
stiffening it with her hand, fingers
ringed about the root, sucks and sucks, runs her
head loosely up and down, her tongue
curling about the object.

The others break leafy twigs from
a tree by the window, arrange
a pattern on the stone floor
croon a half-melody while the girl impales herself on her brother.
Screaming orgasms split the walls.

When it is over
they tell him the secret of life
He creeps to the open window and they watch
subdued and triumphant as he
lets himself fall from the fifth floor
impaling himself on a lamp post
arms akimbo
the sweetest sacrifice
the light put out

△

untitled

A grey day at Gangway 4.
Battery Park.

Red tug
& green tug
cross at the river's mouth
across
from the loading-cranes at Weehawken
MARINE & AVIATION
sayeth the outgoing ferry, a yellow heli-
copter goes over
its circuit of the island in a grey sky . A line of
railroad cars on barges is moved out red & yellow towards Staten
Island

Tourists crowded about the telescopes
are gay birds
the birds themselves
drab . A park
department employee
asks me for a match
One of the pigeons is brown and
splays his wings
center of a puddle . Tugs hoot
& tweet & pass, an-
other helicopter goes over, it
is grey
Grey day.
A pile-driver is heard from the Brooklyn-side
driving 40-ft. logs into that earth . Sparrows
chip & gulls cry . the white
green-&-red striped excursion boats of the Circle Line
circle
A white ferry swings across the channel to Governor's
Island, bricked up there in the light mist
Barge 103 goes past
edged by tug LV . a single Lehigh Valley boxcar
all its weight
America invades New York)
the barge-
man at the back leans against the lug so stilly
he's barely seen
The yellow helicoptor comes back the other way . 8
boxcars (Pacific Fruit) float by my head
still swinging
The Staten Island Ferry (they're always red)
swings out again . 3
other barges, the whistles groan

& warn
This could go on all day

poem is called SIT TEN MINUTES

△

Close to Home : the intimations .

Maybe it IS the quality of the sky, the
clouds . Soft, dark grey, and
without wind or coolness, promising
rain .
The people are themselves . so much so, it
is quarter to the sixes in the evening, if not
the dozens, the half-dozens . One

lady rides past on a bicycle, it is Seventh Street
and her legs are long and the thighs too thin and the
look on her face is an enormity of despair, she is
pedaling very fast.

A girl sits on the fat thigh-fender ofan
automobile, Second Avenue, brown, smiling and relaxed, there is
scar tissue on her thigh . On St. Mark's betw/ 2nd & 1st

a very dark man in a very white shirt
comes and asks me
too apologetically
for a cigarette .

I give it him, then ask if he needs a match . No, he sez
and marches away toward 2nd very brisk . YOU KNOW?
I LIKE a man with independence . But he

walks up the steps of a brownstone, still nervously, not
yet having lit the butt. Someone will take it way from him,

his brownstone? a nicer house than I live in. I wonder
how much rent does he pay? Does it break him? Does he come out
every day to see if someone will give him a cigarette? What
is he doing here?

WHAT AM I?

A man that says yes. Maybe
it is the quality of the sky, the clouds . that soft dark,
without wind
promising rain .

△

M
S

Saint John is the day of our burning
Verbena is the odor of our burning . Mid-
summer night, June 24, 1964,
& full moon this night, also
a total eclipse of the moon . 8:57 to
Moondong, 11 and pico . Micky
Schwerner, Armand's cousin, maybe
dead, 24 years
old, from Brooklyn . The moon
is full in Mississippi also, maybe dead, dark
of the swamps, honeysuckle and moonlight,
ECLIPSE
St. John is the day of our burning. Armand
reads a poem

starting from a remark of mine a month ago
(33 days ago) "Can turn you on"

Allen Ginsberg leans over, tries to turn me on .
He blows in my left ear with a pair of straws .
My two straws
I use to collect lemon peel, other straws, odd bits of paper, using
the two of them like chopsticks to pick
up, until they crumple, broken, used
up? Not quite, I bend them in half, two V's, and make a
W on the table .
We are all turned on
in the semitropical atmosphere
under the city and dogs bark .
I reverse it . I make an
M on the table
M icturating, I think about mic-
turating under the table . Under the hot air midsummer
night, the

smiles of sharks . the dogs .

△

The Voices, It's Cheap

October sun
a bright clean coolness
On the building opposite
shadow of pigeons
the circling flock . one breaks away, higher, building his
circle higher than the rest, but
will return
with them, re-

luctantly and late, but turning at last .
the escort, not the leader, for those moments to
himself for those moments, flying apart, higher,
up.
To whom
shall we have to answer for our actions, our
inactions? We prepare their deaths, their
rooftop landings by the coop our own and
in this sunny afternoon of sharp shadows
and blessed chill, my eyes
rear backward like any mule, to watch, the ears
I cover with my hands a moment against the cold, hear
the song long dead, the sound of voices from another street in
a year long dead, my grandfather's twang, my mother's
elegant kind closed rumble, children's pitched cries calling me
out, that other time, voices
sound in this day of near-winter sun,
I did not know I wanted to hear those voices :
"Can Paul come out, Mrs. Frost?" one shrill, one
look for approval, the guess, and dash for sweater, scarf, and coat.
"Well, bundle up, then," another says
I wanted to hear that, I wanted
to . The bird flies upward against the brick and
does not stop, continues spiral over everything, and out .
Will never stop . The door pulled open, the bright sun
crease about the eyes in a face frozen free, the
cold air strikes .

△

The Language Lesson

"You can wait until the cows come home"
AND THEY DO

It is evening, and the lane and
countryside, the fields are filled with bells, all
out of tune, their own homecoming melodies of clunk and
ank and cunk, stiffened by dog barks, their shanks . the yards
full of mud and ruts, moving the herd
from the lane and road into the slippery hell
in front of the barn, past the wooden bars, two
veer off on the road toward the river fields, I
swing off to counter, outrun them, turn
them back, DRIVE
them through the gate at a dead run
and hit the slick and flat on my

Words already known but never used . age seven .
all right, face, and wiping mud off my backside, how
I learned to curse .

△

The Lonelies

How the signals come in
returning images . sun
pale on the walls . smiles
tender
bodies of strangers locked in that wondering thing
of almost there . wake,
preparing for that leap they are not ready to take,
pull back the cover .
One is strangely fond of another with whose body
one's body has taken pleasure .

Whatever the name of the dance,
whatever the measure.

Annuals

On a dryer day
the leaves fly up in the wind
at 7 o'clock in the coarse hills

Had we been walking alone, I would have taken your hand

About the park / buildings stand
like serious commitments
and will
stand .

The road curves slowly and the roadway's slick
The car comes to a stop at the light
firmly,
as it ought to

"It idles high," he says,
facing the buildings
clutching to keep it in gear
His foot
goes too light and it stalls

"Do you believe in signs?"
she asks him . Fate
leads us to the place only
and leaves us

It commands nothing .

△

O miles

It looks grey, but if you cut it
yeah,
        it is red . blood
passes in a circuit thru our bodies, it
makes a noise, tho we do not hear it

He covered his blood with a robe . it
hid it . Clouds
                at the last on a spring day
                run across the sky . Run,
clouds, there is no time left .

the blooded clouds
at sunset
the stone .
He
had been falling for years and when
he came to it, it was fast.

△

The Ghost

Opening the door to friends
    they come in, it's
        party time .

I stay sober, have to, I'm
    doing the serving. Go
        slow .

Friends enter what I

thought was my world,
take their parts
in it. Go

talk . the constant walk to the
icebox, the list of
what in whose glass and
to what hand .

Middle evening, a man arrives
who has or is about to take
his pants off and become
my wife's lover .

I sense his edge and don't know
what it is, I
greet him warmly .
Our friend .

Much later, all the drinkers go
Two house guests stay and he
and she .

We talk, the friends go up to bed,
I also to our room, finally
wiped by hostly tensions and
the final few stiff drinks,
we leave them there . It's three

A.M. I wake at 8:15, the
bed is
empty beside me.

△

From the Parked Car

Cigarette butt
lies smoking itself
on the wet sidewalk
a few moments in
a Ryoanji relationship to
a filtertip from another cigarette
and two wooden matches
Sand is cement in a later
incarnation.

△

Karin Lessing

Dunes

1.

Shadow-
cloths, you

pin
and un-

pin, blown,

settling, again rising

night-
drift, dunes.

2.

crests, wayfarers,

a grain, each night,

lodges another

whispers from further a-
way, from under

all this
debris.

3.

they change

though you can't see it

wind,
planter and scythe

a wandering

drought, whet-
stones.

4.

like hills
or a voice

suddenly wavering

where
it diamonds,

their meeting
slopes.

5.

medusas of sand

each word that the sea-wind once

murmured,

dropped,
grows a shadow: *as the shadow*

of a great rock
in a weary land.

6.

all
day

the fields'
hooped obstacles

of light

not a breath nor bird's cry

un-
centering the flint

crescendos.

7.

for Nicole

then greys,

the mute encounters

shells crushed, a mist
curled where your face

went under, entered

the quiet air.

8.

words, rolled ensigns

fly past, swift

as the finger that
lights them,

in dune-
light keeping distance

undiminished.

9.

past the shimmering

brow shore-line bright

in fading to drown

the lights
as if deeper than sleep

the void
unspinning itself, its colors.

10.

from wet in mist risen

orchard of stars, the almost-

rounded
night.

vaned,
a word's shadow

sand as it shifts -,
from brow to finger

lighter, falls.

Δ

Jed Rasula

from The Field & Garden of Circe

Sol qui illustras omnia solus.
Ocular ignition of the mask
lowered into on the face a grid
inscrutable deduced inner growth
herbs planets syncopated virtues
stone yarns radial earth supposes
these powers spirits

each under humus
cortical ferral animal man
mirrors powers one each every aspect
makes it what need to demonstrate you?

dragon unfolds your parts o sôl
these gusting potent natures ranging
one human abstract maker species
in your extrinsic face is prior
figures extracting conjugations
a pliable blue of applewood flame
doubled over all unload to light
if every all of yours firms gracing terminus
liquid more your nothing more
more nothing of speaking
"who said"

tuning equator strings up vines of gods
voluble powers impediment none
"nothing is knower"

ungraved bow drawn earth ignited
reminding tend your finger sun your spores
whirling patterning spokes it burns you touching

rouge of the lion

*

again your handled sun you hold my mind
explicate rogue of lion
lynx goat cat snake elephant
shields of animal history
pertinent genre grace
capillary beetle scarab cricket
dung of the wolf salivary nudge of the demon
elk swallow quail corruscations in flight
horns & chapels of celery & seed of the head
a turtle in its vault a genius of the compass
branch leaching cloud leaf tuning oxygen
red measures green breathing upper virtues
under vicarious coal dilating the hyacinth ruby
script percussions open plain unique prediction
learning reverence induces radical watery root
your principle mind mould eye in ocular heaven
sky of the sprouted stalk architect animals mirror
earth-reflective radii spokes & whirling signals
magnets are polar appetite puddles saucers of judgment
pitchfork in corn grains in honey
tern quail dipped mallard bill

whatever volume aquatic bones
of the chest are carpenter's shutters
draping palpable sap
redness running buttons of pus
bramble thicket swamp toad or crab scrambling on cancer
polishing osprey bones your natal certainty
nimble all wandering candid shaper clarity maiden
bashful whispering pious compassion *ejaculatrix*
suckling ocean's nodding lord squeezed milk & seed
to pertinent bodily mother & father
keeper of groves' thick sylvan dominance
nursing loamy moisture treasures pledges pooled
in upper atmosphere again in larval sun to rain
Apollo's insect consorts flying through the speckled mask
chromatic reeds & fibers
brushes dipped in animal glue & ink
angular polyps sepia sponges & other watery genesis relics

even Saturn you aroused
applied your adopted persons
animal history add to your pertinent amor
I ask your ox or camel in its ear of corn
breathing original seed dentations
liquid theatrical plectrum stroked
thrums early creatures into view
residual scorpion heraldry
musk locus broken partly potent grainy bodies
tide's complexing currents bears
on shore dipping salmon whales in the wake of the craft
frothing the water deciduous circles of temporal memory dispelling
on rocks beyond one upstream inlet spawning
rush a throng a bodily pink
transparent even the seeds
inside are naked vivid potency

cogital abundance

ampersand in
contemplator

*

the great spectacle of the mirror in transit
clouding the ground sogging earth air signs where warmed

seething dominates furrow tilled
temporal governor modulates sickle's durable twist
barley rye wheat god assembled in
barefoot patter down rows of corn
bringing giving pronouncing serrations of oak
immensity estimating space
consumed endured dissolving every
ample tractate dragons of legible trails
derived from spinning constancy
these silent currents plowed
Jove kindles breath on clouds
genius of the open sky a fire
smoke a father's always somehow aura curls

for you this assembly translates direction
hesitate your eagle monitors a pig
pelican spore's index of feast
earth on water water on rock
filament company generating awe
chameleon under the tortoise shell
a salivating ox a summer breeze the
new moon up the entrails blue
a buoyant sponge of every genre

method from which a finger on fingers
me to your all insistence
relax you leaf her explication
healing the ember glutted with color out of ash
except you rouge the lion so
as if in worth the radiant while
numbered the pleasures each by each

some under some hidden some where
cicadas & scarabs, cornice of sound
a leach of borders destinate
Alexicacus Phanes Horus
Apollo day Dionysus night
Diespiter daily
wherever virtues order ruby gripped
the seminal light bewitched her
marrow you're spine to her risen
planet a hood or cape drawn about her
lungs demonstrative shoulders amplexus
vertiginous drape these others' bodies ardors
igniting moulds around me
lively spoors her muddy tracks
educe production leaf her umbral divigation
all nature alike a queen of air

bright striking root or rod the basal gleam
interpretive lady
to your foremost nature
architect of oldest signals
answers raven or ant
salt or flour in hand pours into the lines
beaks buttons cyclones of eyes aspiring bodies

all in cursive script wet elements of wood
fossil hosting a bird only in
flight in the stone agile all-eyed shale
flat-skipping still creek eddied on a pool
where powers smear to tell it opus
to seed it spills a warm spelled hut
are peaks of water cresting on gravel or sand
breakers or pegs of a dock
who pine ravine spells down by needle
through outer bottom's autumn river in flow
corrects the tug of other moving earths
planet's farther ears of world
scruples of shaken distance
animate nipple dripping dominant content
blood the body draws up showering milk
lightened a gravel of dew on reins of floss
a spider's magnetic nest returns the
sun her egg to its cup
so quick the many-keeping sting
the loamy region crusty with larval shells
cocoons & tough dry worms tail of a
rat ear of a rabbit insect-potent
consorts of Apollo work on these
you & your Saturn old erect
capable potent formal *you*
thou bubble of ice mirror original silt
clatter of wings & legs him of the sistrum
abounding bodies in pebbles of shaken corn
dolphins nudging cords of sunny twine
run through ocean bushes hollows spells
charmed sludge turned green a predicate of magic
throngs of species suckled on yearning
twirling the upright fiber deposits them under the sun

pious hilarious regal submissive correct
a fortune drawing the smell of grapefruit on wind
rate a porous collection its shock of seed
run down on muck another lordly surface
gods are fortunate humans are shallow bridles
flexed in astral service a swell of lore
prompting the gap her peering forward *shows*
the only essential unlimit her copious will
promoter of powers personal surface of optimal states
prospered apparel all surfaces gods
whose endless world of the seed a vibrating pivot

shapes of appetite stored in eggs
buds in the opening eyes
hawks in their ballast of air
the genes' yolks wasps in hordes warm
blur of wings chromatic dyes
dragon narration collating wits
valves of the magma hours are
thickening ducts exact a flow of chunks
steam of risen early lifting the yellow
narcissus laboring phalloi spent in color
collapsing open to air & pollen resuscitant
drifting warmth & wet of the heap collaborate
previous music fury of all in sequence
formed again together in strumming resisted
strings unbudged on the bridge the hollow body
dissipates obstinate vibrating air
inscrutable traction darting abundance plucked
collapsible airs, flues, hollows, uses, uses who wears

*

out of my talks with Mercury otherwise Hermes
nights of Atlantiades born in generosity
cogent their pupae lucid the Chaldean flower
Penelope scissors pollinating orchids
her lattices heavily bulged with phlox
the ratio pouring through the window
is petals' calibrated diligence
caduceus Mercury's feathered hood
winged young enumerable divinity
tracking stars lines pointing
gathered transparent active in sight
darkening night elucidates steps do they glow
sufficient labor invention proceeds he
whispers turning his feathered stick
"you are induced"

Memphite Athenian Olympian Egyptian
in Circe's fabric tighten your animal borrowing
suckled on herbs & fuming spices
insinuate the weight of the testicle stone
a sticky sweetness gripped with water
in urgent suction of the sun
your *hers* who wears your shadows too
as sage's mulched manure spread
hunched leaf to sniff a coast of seeds
occulted aperture percolated tavern
hollow reed through water air through gills
ease of doors and gates does prophecy
of mortal animals aggravate sky's consistency
when Hades shares his bed with mint?

△

Wild Blue Phlox

It was supposed to be outside
labor to cross to not there
to crystal of the wilderness
I've been careless astray also
the wilderness inside within.

So blue is my color after all
distinction of the impoverished
color of movement removement
I am moved to enflamed crystal
my color color of the crystal.

Flower in branched blue flame
flower rendered wild blue flame
flower souvenir of my error
the wilderness inside within
flower how long must we burn?

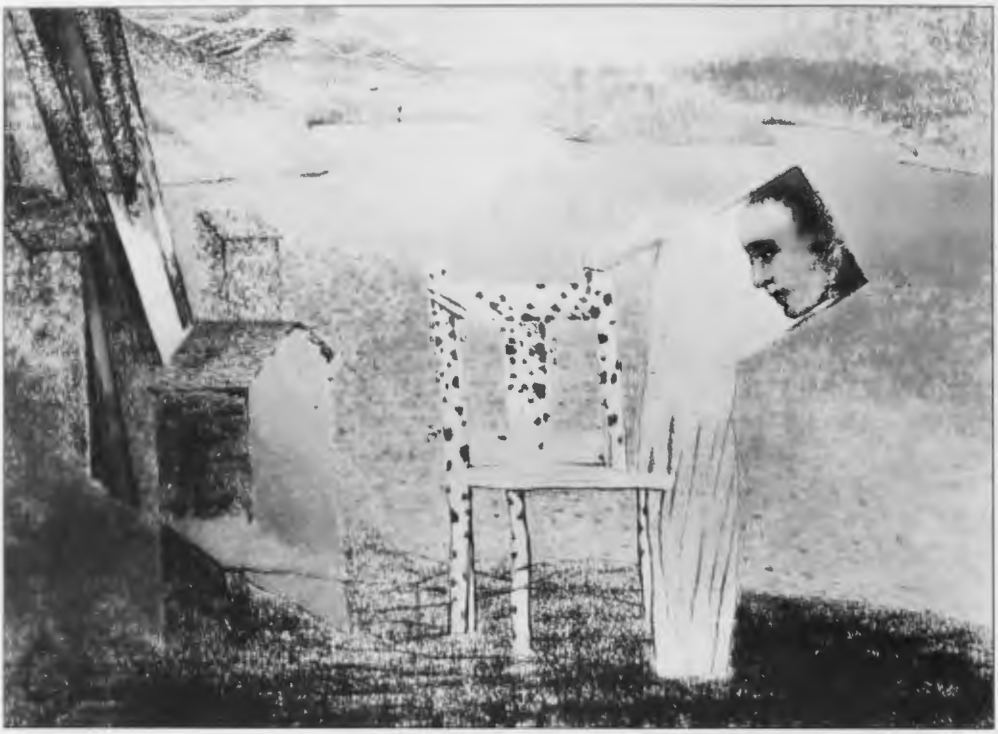
△

I R V I N G P E T L I N

Essau, 1980

The Two Josephs, 1979

The Daughters of Lot, 1980



"This is the Place," 1980

The Stolen Blessing 1, 1980

Descent, 1979

Michael Davidson

The Words Are Trapped in Doxa

Thin smoke rises from them
from the blue row houses on Walter Giesekingstrasse
next to the park
or where you are not
thinking of anything and they throw you a ball

you have a choice: to throw it back
to throw it to a third or leave it lie
you can marry the tycoon's voluptuous daughter
and perpetuate a sexual accident
or make a deal with the CIA
these are choices
no one makes for you and to have them
is to be alive
but confused, how
cool it became on the patio, bugs
banging against the screen, a distant skunk
wafting over suburbia
I hear your nervous typewriter
because, nervous, I can't be alone
and they (the bugs) want to get out
where the dark meets them (hello)
since they are dark and composing something
we are
not understanding
blue fish, green flash, happy tourist

school of low cruising pelican, flotilla
of ponderous seaplanes or a tree
of small birds cheeping while the cat
lies at its base on his back
"so many bites!"
it's Summer, why move
thus close eyes and stretch, words
stretch with you

the people walk about on the beach
and know nothing but they talk
we know this because their mouths move
which also kiss and suck air
from a distance
the distance is close
they write letters
to seal it.

You Are Not Great You Are Life

I don't get far I get there
where he is playing an organ
at the Episcopal Church
across the way and when the piece
is finished there is a pause
in which I wait to hear
applause but instead a car starts up
gets flooded
and keeps on starting
then Murphy makes a little noise
from outside the garage
which he wants to enter
but we don't let him is this prose
or is his will strong enough
to hold out, the organ
does not return, the car is gone
it must have been Faure, late afternoon
clouds and a slight breeze which sounds like
prose, crowds at the track are eating dinner
made out of lobster and steak
as is the custom here
tomorrow early clearing highs
in the 90's inland at the coast
they go so I go and he says like
and really good shrimp salad
we are connected to our neighbor

through the pipes, when he flushes
even late at night
we know it
what does he look like we ask
the night is large
we'd like to go on
self-analysis is fun
but tiring, coffee stimulates
but after an entire day
enervates, Friday
and the crickets ribit and someone shouts
down the street, today I hear noises
that mean nothing
trying to take the place of people
who mutter under their breaths
and sound like wind.

Watermark

I

Subaqueous light, amber light, blue refracted light
Portable island with dialect and natives
"Invest," one says, another says "breathe" and so we breathe
At night the boulevards are filled with snow
By day sun browns the grass to amber
Here are cities pressed out of vowels:
Mylae, Carthage, Rhodes and the Balearic Islands
Their bridges: floating, single span, covered, suspension
Milky Way, Peace, Rainbow, Sighs and
"The Howling Pflegethon below" by vermiform appendix
And unto Circe by ice cap, tundra and savanna
Portable word horde and the vortices or pits of such an extent
A sound as of tinkling bells while he roared
So as to be heard on shore
You are everywhere this skull is
Shortgrass, coniferous forest, river valley and oasis
A loud and gradually increasing sound
Like the moaning of buffalo upon an American prairie
Thus we came upon land for air
And here is air

II

In suspension where by water gauge gather
Portable word hoard in waterglass and through tympanum

And semicircular canals float Waterloo, single-span bridge
A gigantic beauty of a stallion, fresh and responsive,
In solution flood songs gathering and showing always and with
velocity
Dark owl, dark eye, water tiger, water moccasin
Water rat edging around tidal water table rising and falling
Heard through a kind of shrill shriek
Such a sound as given off by water pipes
Mouth as by Seavoice, ear as hydraphone to hear
Water chestnut and closet, waterbane and distant Waterbury
By which he heard deep air, the heaving speech of air
Waterstrider our underwriter on pond writes
Disappearing traces across watercourse
Afflatus solitary taking gauge of Walden through ice
Erasable watermark we stand by and hear

III

Do you hear any thing? Do you see any change in the water?

I became aware of a loud and gradually increasing sound like the
moaning
of a vast herd of buffalo upon an American prairie.

But the roar of its impetuous ebb to the sea is scarce equalled by

the loudest and most dreadful cataracts

. . . and the vortices or pits are of such an extent and depth

The gulf of Bothnia

I could not help smiling at the simplicity with which the honest
Jonas Ramus records, as a matter of belief, the anecdotes of the
whales
and the bears

The roaring noise of the water was completely drowned in a kind of shrill shriek—such a sound as . . . given off by the water pipes of many thousand steam-vessels letting off their steam all together.

A cylinder, swimming in a vortex

It happens frequently that whales come too near the stream and are overpowered by its violence; and then it is impossible to describe their howlings and bellowings

A bear once, attempting to swim from Lofoden to Moskoe was caught by the stream and borne down, while he roared terribly so as to be heard on shore

Speeding dizzily round and round with a swaying and sweltering motion and sending forth to the winds an appalling voice, half shriek, half roar such as not even the mighty cataract of Niagara ever lifts up in its agony to Heaven

IV

for Lou Harrison

The bell like world
From childhood I crawled
On deep pile Persian rugs
A beautiful language for songs
Vibrating automobile brake drums
Plumber's pipes galvanized wash tubs
Or bubbles like a sash of camel bells
That wonderful stimulating smell of lacquer
He exclaims in suspension
Five songs in the mail

Complete with nipples and hands
To play them with
Miracle practice hymn pulsation blue shirt
Buoy as watermark
It's handy
Having your own orchestra around
Blue roar Chinese gong
I have to have space around me
Gelatinous bubbles bearing "ouzel"
Or "watercourse" or "gamelan"
With a voice like a glockenspiel
And then we played the Ives' fourth
Out of water, in water
Flutes and viols

V

Here floor as hour glass orifice readying to fill the air with falling
Below Australia and higher Alaska
Ice refracting rose light across glaciers, glottals
Here air equals letter equals you floating equals
Tree equals parapluie equals shade
A color wheel and volcano, swimming in a vortex
Of the bell like world here wall is our syllable
House of Zeus, rescue from rowboat, Ibis, naked surfer
And below, salvages "which is the eye of the heart"
As they rise eyes upward and like bubbles
Carry jars and the vowels that follow

A Note on "Watermark"

The following text began with a conversation in Marseilles between the composer, Michel Redolfi, and myself over the possibilities of some type of underwater

text/music collaboration. Michel had been experimenting with sound generated through and by water and had produced a number of tapes which made use of sounds electronically synthesized (on the Synclavier) as well as sounds picked up acoustically on a hydraphone submerged in various coves around San Diego. I felt that in order to compose a text for such music I should make use of the acoustic properties of my own voice projected underwater. Michel aided me by providing a device used by skindivers called the "Sea Voice." This instrument, which consists of a plastic mouthpiece attached to a rubber bladder, is used by divers to communicate underwater. By emptying the bladder of any water or air and then speaking into it, the voice may be projected over a relatively large distance with notable clarity (but with fascinating distortions as well). When I began using the Sea Voice in a pool, I realized that certain phonemes could not be easily produced (nasals in particular), and thus the text had to be continually rearranged as the limits of the device became evident. I also realized that since I had to keep returning to the surface of the water for air, whatever text I created would have to be relatively modular, allowing for sudden abrupt truncations and interruptions. There were attendant logistical problems as well involving the physical text: how to keep it from falling apart underwater and how to keep it from floating away. It occurred to me that I might memorize the text and save some trouble, but then again I was interested in the complications of underwater poetry more than possible solutions.

When all of these problems were ironed out and the text was completed (with the help of Poe, Stevens, Schuyler, Whitman, Pound and a brief biography of Lou Harrison), Michel taped me reading it underwater while playing tapes of his own electronic music in the background. The resultant tape and another involving Jerome Rothenberg were played at the first "Underwater Concert" held at the Center for Music Experiment on the weekend of June 6, 1981.

John Yau

Corpse and Mirror

1

When one of our citizens dies, his corpse is placed in his chariot. To help him reach his destination, his favorite horses are buried with him.

By the time dawn breaks out of its cage in the mountains, the gravediggers have gently lowered the chariot into a pit. Now, the horses must be rounded up and measured with the precision of a tailor. For each of these nervous engines must be fitted smoothly into its own grave, so that only the head with its fearful yet fiery eyes emerges above the ground, like a hand rising above the sea.

Once the gravediggers have accomplished this difficult task, they return immediately to the city. Their pace is quickened by the knowledge that inside their kitchens steam has started rising from glistening slabs of meat, tureens of brightly colored vegetables, and baskets of earth colored breads. All afternoon they have dreamed of entering a room like this, full of solace and celebration. And yet, when each of them reaches its door, they hesitate, almost as if they wished they could join the procession of heads towing an invisible cargo towards the setting sun and the next city that must be reached before dawn escapes once more.

If the man's sins outweigh his acts of kindness, the horses will eventually collapse and blood will stream from their nostrils. Beneath the moon the man will revive, but he will have become so hideously ugly since his last breath left him that no one — not even the most generous of samaritans — will be able to offer him food and shelter. He

will remain in this condition, doomed to wander in the desert like a vulture without wings.

The only way he will be given another chance is if one of his neighbors dreams about him in the week following his death. In the dream the man must give his exact location beneath the stars. At dawn, the neighbor must ride out to the spot and see if he is there. If he isn't, the kind hearted neighbor must dismount immediately and begin praying, for he has been deceived once again. Death has not prevented the deceased from continuing along the path he chose in life. If the neighbor doesn't pray at once, he must give up all hope of ever finding his way back to the city. The dead man has chosen him for a companion, and he has been foolish enough to accept.

2

When one of our citizens dies, his head is cut off and placed inside a mirror-lined box. The box is tightly sealed, allowing no light to enter its interior, and placed in the least used room of the house. Each night someone from the family must sleep beside the varnished cube in which the head resides. After two weeks have eclipsed, the box can be buried beside the rest of the corpse.

However, if everyone in the family bears a grudge against the deceased, an anger so deep that death has not removed its poison, they may burn the box and joyfully kick the ashes and bone fragments into the river. The decision must be agreed upon unanimously and it must be reached without being mentioned. Finally, once the ashes begin floating downstream, the deceased's name can never be brought up in conversation again.

Once the head is placed inside the box, the eyelids will push against the weight of dreams and sleep until they open. It will never occur to him that his head has been severed from his body. Instead, he will believe he has been kidnapped and buried in the sand. Before him is a road stretching to the horizon. Above him the moon patrols the walls of its vast domain. Escape is impossible. By morning the vul-

tures will begin circling patiently in the sky.

Soon he begins rambling, imagining his mouth is parched and full of sand. This is a signal. Whoever is sleeping in the room must awaken immediately and listen to the voice echoing inside the box. What happens next depends on who has died. If instructions are uttered, they must be followed faithfully. If a confession is made, it must be heard without judgement. Whatever is said must be kept a secret.

If you are sent to another city, you must saddle your horse at dawn and leave without speaking to anyone. Once you are there, you must find the house the voice described. A house similar to all the houses on all the winding streets in this haphazardly designed city and yet in one essential way different. When the door opens you will know why. However, if the person who answers the door is puzzled by your request, then you have failed to listen to the instructions carefully enough. In this case, you must return to your house without speaking to anyone along the way. You cannot sleep beside the box again, but must remain inside your room until the two weeks are over.

One night, after the box has been buried or burned, you will hear something outside your window, inside your dream. The words may not be words at all, but the fluttering of a bird caught in a snare. A broken pot. A bucket falling into a well. Listen carefully. He may need to speak to you once again.

Corpse and Mirror II

1

When a comet passes over the town, whoever sees it knows a corpse will be found at the edge of the forest shortly after dawn.

Last week, an old woman, who embroiders tablecloths with human hair, saw one from her kitchen window, and knew her grandson had wandered too far from the road leading home.

If they are lying face up with their eyes open and clear, as if they are still puzzled by the last thing they saw, then they must be cremated and their ashes scattered over the lake.

If, however, they are lying face down with their eyes closed, as if they had dozed off while recalling the intricate lattice of a pleasant hour they passed through years ago, then they must be buried immediately. No stone must mark the spot.

Otherwise, both the deceased and its discoverer are doomed to remember a moment, its sunlit basket of fruit, as if each drop of significance would forever elude them.

Some find it impossible to believe their life is chained to a comet. If they were to submit to the possibility that the stars have exiled us from their provinces, then they must accept that the unfolding story will go on without them.

In the afternoon you see them huddled in the dark cafes. Sometimes, their mumbling reaches the street they way the sound of dry branches

rubbing against each other pierces a dream.

Then one is awakened by a comet passing overhead; and once again the light echoing in our eyes reminds us that we were meant to wander from one day to the next, like dogs without masters.

2

When you break a mirror, you must count up the pieces to see if they add up to your age. If they do, you must change your name and leave town at once.

Do not speak to anyone you meet on the road until you have reached a town, where everyone speaks a language different from your own. Otherwise, you will wake up in someone else's coffin.

Do not tell anyone your name until you have forgotten every affectionate endearment you were summoned by as a child. Otherwise, one morning, the only voice you hear will be your own, echoing down the long hallways beneath sleep.

The voice will begin telling you a story aboiut a child who hears someone calling his name. No matter which way the child turned, the source of the voice eluded him. And, as the story enters daylight's tenement, you will realize that you are the child, and it is your voice that is calling.

Corpse and Mirror III

1

When the movie ends and the lights come on, the audience is puzzled by the sight of a corpse reclining on a velvet sofa in clothes of human hair. Each item has been carefully sewn, so that the hair resembles a white silk shirt and a three piece wool suit flecked with gold.

On the mahogany table is a brass ashtray in the shape of a bulldog. Smoke curls from its nostrils as if it had swallowed a cigarette. An emerald butterfly glistens on his left index finger. In his bluish gray hands is a book whose pages are made of glass.

The next afternoon I drive to the outskirts of town, where there is a restaurant named after a traitor famous for his ingenious disguises. Many of its patrons think that even the name is a disguise and he still moves among us.

I have never been able to remember the plot of the movie, only the colors it traced against the arch of the bridge connecting the room's two halves together. On one side shines the movie and on the other sits the corpse. Passing back and forth between them is a conversation made of human hair.

2

When the movie ends and the lights come on, the audience is puzzled by the sight of a large oval mirror leaning haphazardly against a

column which wasn't there at the beginning of the evening's entertainment.

Scarves stop fluttering, and, one by one, hands drop nervously into laps, like birds patroling the perimeters of their nests. Mouths twist beneath the receding waves of whispers, almost as if there were a place they could hide.

A reflection appears in the mirror, though the stage is empty. The men see a woman brushing her hair, while the women see a man trimming his beard.

Later, no one will be able to agree on what they saw. The memory of one event will become so entangled with the memory of another, until all that remains is the ache of trying to recall a moment, whose slanting room of sunlight has long since fallen in. By then the mirror will have vanished and the movie will have begun, this time in pieces.

△

Nathanial Tarn

Three Months in Which to Live

Making room for love in the morning
if it will come by, rather than search it out
after "the work" is done: declaring *it* the work,
letting the poem be, declaring *it* the work,
in the morning, out of the shadows
the light has such a list of at that hour
to summer's promise-crammed humanity —
while we have that illusion of hope around us,
a cage adventuresome with birds:
the boundless liberty of the hunt for words
in which all things will finally rest at peace.

Opening Out a Line at Mandelstam's

In that blessed weariness where he has done
the best he can with you world, falling apart
as he conjoins, conjoining as he falls apart,
not once the two meeting together: in concord,
amity — that synthesis from which they say
everything flowers — but what is this
(on the edge of the worker's sleep usually)
when he has spent a rare full day at labor
sensing, secret, mysterious, that recompense:
to feel the whole weight of oneself as a man!
Birds inside forest, like a cage,
forest inside the world, like a cage, world
in the arms of someone you would call a goddess
were you not so sure you had seen her someplace
almost recently, had you no reason to believe
you might have loved her once a while back,
or been in debt to her for friendship
of the most comforting kind: around you,
all pleasure — sounds of birds, beyond earshot,
guessed at only, as if by a deaf composer —
lights up whole evenings, causing rare laughter,
inexplicable mirth, *joie de vivre* your friends
disbelieve and find it hard to credit
while the centuries surround you like fire.

Energetically Singing Against Voracious Earth

In his weariness to death he hears beautiful song
simple and ravaged like the figure of liberty
in energetic youth. When all noise has died down
song sings itself with the earnest of snow in winter
causing everything to disappear into its poverty.
A song he has been waiting to hear all his life:
a simple, one-way song, knowing no more of love,
wit, ambition — but now content
merely to be itself. A bird in the branches
passing over the canal to other similar branches:
is the song from his own mouth to his own ear.
No one else on earth will ever hear it —
and it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter
in any way familiar to the voracious earth!

And Even the Republic Must Have an End

Hearing a voice inside himself, not quite his,
he hears it with gratitude different from his —
for the effort to keep his own voice together
has for the longest time remembered been painful.
What a comfort there are now two voices not one.
Two voices twinly, like the breasts of a girl.
Soon he'll be trying to keep the voices to two
for others multiply. It is the many-breasted
mother of darkness wraps him. Two would have been
sufficient: he could live with two at some length.
The dialectic, though painful, can be managed.
More would split rivers, failing in sea reach,
split forests and mountains on the borders,
shatter the sky's blue bowl into the mirrors of
a thousand pulses, rive the green, hillen earth.
Everywhere the honeland lies in ruins abone him.

The Tree of Another World

At this moment, when all of human beauty
forgathered in them as it left them, as they stood
on the threshold of age, faces falling apart
spot by spot, fold by fold, scar by scar of flesh,
the minute details escaping all eyes but their own
(now they see themselves alone, now together),
how could there be a time more poignant for knowing
that love cannot be plumbed, that they are stapled
together like twin texts falling into the depthless,
two leaves at autumn which the air has caught
and locked in hazardous embrace for the long descent,
leaves the withering gods read casually as they pass by,
waiting for another world to be born from another tree.

△

Ron Silliman

Skies II

for Alan Bernheimer

HEAT IS THE CONSEQUENCE of light (cats sleep under parked cars), the old women look small & bundled, wrapped in overcoats on their way to mass (I hear a rooster crow in the city). Running through it (straight at the sun in the cypress), field's dew soaks my shoes (fresh dogshit glistens wet in the light). A glow to the bay, above it (low mist steaming), a woman in a cotton skirt & sandals hurries between the jets of water sprinkling the park, a small white pup rolls on its back on the tennis court (downtown, smog's gray layer awaits, halo to highrise). The hosed-off walks of the shops shine (schoolkids & clericals bunch at the busstop, the 10 Monterey slowly grinding its way to the top of the hill), the grocer propping a newsrack against his open door. Form is the flower's fate, closed in a morning fog (cat sniffs a caterpillar on the dusty path), oceanic shush of traffic on the freeway in the valley, a fly wrestles with a web. Birds in the fir tree chirping (dawn softened by clouds to a gradual increase in light), the radio traffic copter glides low over the road. A cluster of flies in the morning buzz about the corner of the yard, lone gull foregrounded against the browns of the next hill, Juan standing on the porch landing to watch (later you hear their hum in the tree, but can't see them), wind

bangs the door shut, low cloud's tide flowing steadily in. Yellow brick seminary, silhouette in the fog (pigeon pecks at crust in the gutter), a man in a sweatshirt touching his toes on the lawn (car warming up sends forth blue billows), rising sun peeks thru, lighting the underside of this huge cloud, gray & white & pink mixed together. The dew on the cobweb gleams (she runs the Fiat to warm it up), two girls in parochial school skirts (he runs in circles around the track), the moon in the sky at dawn is full. Sit in chair on porch in sun (two doors over, sound of a hammer), clothesline begins at the window (valley vibrates softly to the jet's passing roar). Everything blisters in a rare heat (leaves on the plum tree curl & crackle, the growing coleus bangs at the glass), in the street people walk around with one hand shading their eyes, behind the broken windows & boarded up doors of the abandoned house I hear a power saw. At night with stars out those with convertibles show them off (a war on the porches of water balloons, water pistols), baby blue Rolls with the words *Low Class* in grey on the door (tonight everybody sleeps with the windows open, under not more than a sheet). Waist-high in the froth, children tempt the rip-tide (barely possible, but for the boat in the distance, to discern the horizon), smell of cocoa butter (large straw hats). Staring for a moment out the window into the blue glare (its shape a 6-sided figure, three the frame, the rest the conjunction of porch & neighboring roof), I am unable to see the page or make out the words on it (plum tree's branch bobs into view)(play of the web of shadows over the dirt in the yard), the sound of a logging truck on the freeway below, large, is specific (ditto the rev of a dirt bike mounting the slope), Chicanas, Filipino couples, an occasional older Chinese woman, bundled & crowded on the bus, Bibles in hand (dog in the small yard stalks its fences), Tom in a grey sweatshirt on his way to Jim's Donuts for breakfast (bathmat 'dries' on the rail in the fog, she waters the carrots "in case". Red garbage truck emerges from the fog, halfsize yellow schoolbus following behind (beads of water on the inside of the bathroom window after a shower), fly carves a zigzag path in the air of the room (with a rubber-edged window scraper, he wipes

the moisture from the windshield of the van), the birds will stay quiet longer on a dark day. The sun in the dew in the tree (because one's just risen, the other yet to burn off): image of a million diamonds (the pastels peculiar to this hour, say, to the homes of the far hill, a consequence of dawn's steam), I see my own breath, hear the clothesline pulleys, a jet flying west shines in the light. Straight up it's sunny, but to the south you can't see to the end of the block (cat emerges from fog), gull's shrill cry absorbed by the sound of the jet, schoolbus stops in front of the house & honks. Gradually light penetrates the dusty bamboo shade, casting its striped glare (cigar smoke circles the hanging spider plant), the kitchen light left on is useless, the dog's small yap never stops (sound of ice, melting, rearranging itself in the glass). At night under high fog the city casts a light that reflects halfway between pink & a dull orange (sodium vapor), the wind marks a turn in weather, on this block the curtains are no more than cloths tacked up over the windows (at dawn a man begins to patch the shingles on his roof), the shush of the valley's rush hour traffic. Briefly rain scars the window (the broken sky at night sits darkened behind the illumined clouds), that streaked & flattened effect as if the clouds had been "bottomed off" (the slice of a vast blade), cheesy, piled high & tumbling one into another (he stands on the porch contemplating which jacket...), then, just as sudden & brief, a flash of sun. The wet ground is darker (the green tops of carrots stand in high contrast), thru the white of a cobweb I see a half-dozen small clouds, each a deep grey at the bottom (one hides the sun), white glare above, a jet threads its way behind them, traveling in the opposite direction (west). The way black smoke of a structural fire drifts over an intersection (the buzz of a sportscar from down in the valley), the cat on the window sill, the young girls in parochial school skirts (thick, heavy, rolling, not smoke at all). The sharp shadows cast west from the hill of white houses (small, discrete) grows less distinct (the sun rises from a plum tree), the parakeet chirrups from its cage at the window (a flock of what rushes partway thru the valley, only to turn back, then back again?), & tho the ones above it are streaked & dark,

one cloud over the hilltop is stark white. The windows steamed by a shower, the rectangular sky is reduced to a tone (hearing the door open, the cat on the upper deck of the back porch meows & hurries down), the garden stays damp for days, this must be a regular take-off pattern (so many jets heading west), you can't leave both doors open at once (wind rips the poster from the kitchen wall), an orange monarch is loose in the roses (the sun in the cobwebs bejewels the fence). The crack in the glass in the door on the porch halves the sky (human barometer pressures blood), pigeons have taken over the closed-down bowling alley (an old woman sprinkling crumbs in the gutter attracts thousands, she's at the eye of a whirling feathery storm), but this glass is frosted (I make out the steps by the shadow) & the dog at the corner has begun to bark. The first glow (pale yellow-orange tinged with purple) appears unnatural (screened by a bamboo shade) ahead as it is of the sun that only now nears the horizon (people sit in their cars in the dark, letting the engines run), I sit at a table crowded with violets & ferns, watching the new light catch the thin, fine field of hair on the back of these familiar hands (cat at the back door scratches to get in). Moisture on the cold glass (political posters taped to it start to slump) catches the sun for a second, weak point in the (fading) fog, colors of the houses (buff, olive, white) half-pulse in the unstable light, a peristalsis (that door which slammed, unseen, belongs to a car), first Saturday hammering begins. Catlike, headlights thru the valley fog glimmer & inch forward in the morning traffic, roosters & dogs squawk together (the big half-shepherd chasing the terrified jogger thru the field for the fun of it), my breath (visible) the color of the sky (hummingbird perfectly still on the plum tree's branch), cat licks his paw & wipes his face. Wisps turn red, then orange, white as the blue softens (what fog there is is camped in that furthest gulley — you look down on it), colors emerge in the garden (a thousand greens, each distinct), in a driveway a car sits in a blue cloud of its own gases, a pile driver rings in the distance, that jet's body catches the full light of the sun (fat & orange in the horizon's shimmering smog). As the dull haze slowly rises what is first visible (bleached by the glare) is that

which lays closest to the ground (like pigeons, the women gather in front of Kingdom Hall, waving their magazines), a man walks a leashed Afghan across the diamond in the park (two small flies whirl around one another in the center of the room), these tiny stucco houses, side by side by side. At the hilltop (back into fog) shadows fade, the eucalyptus drips with dew (a woman is taking her daughter to wait at a busstop), already salsa is beginning to emerge from the open garage door, but one block down the shadows are sharp & leaning, slanting across the small squares of lawn. Like dirty cotton absorbing light & heat (the dogs whining in their yards at the smell of rain), the carpenter leaning to spit out the window, the cat in the basement (thru the blinds all I see is the yellow of the schoolbus), but still the clothesline pulley squeals. Between storms the clouds are still, the gunmetal sky a compromise, a high dome (a low wind pushes dirt up from the batter's box), so cold your ears start to hurt & (inside) the rain begins. Three-quarter moon in the clouds in the tree (in the morning a rich blue everywhere but for the low gray wall far to the west, the moon smaller & turned now (chip on the bottom), ready to set), the damp grass cold to sit down on. Unseen jet in the sky balances unseen traffic in the valley, the clatter of the garbagemen a block away (the glare in the haze as you run seems everywhere, breath made visible). The point at which the jet's noise becomes pure, deep vibration (in the valley, in the jaw), the windows to the kitchens of all these homes (joined by their back yards) thrown open (an old man steps forth from the basement to empty a bucket at the rear of his garden, wearing knit cap & sweater on a hot day), this cluster of unpainted porches. Under the freeway where the pigeons live in perpetual shadow, white-green droppings caked everywhere & into the sunbrust street of small stucco houses (buff, olive, white), the hour when the old women slowly walk small dogs to & from the gutter (a man uses a special device to wipe the dew from his windshield), shadows shortening as the sun moves up (garbage cans line up on the sidewalk are empty now)(it seems smaller as it rises higher, less orange, more yellow). A high gray smear, a stain (far to the North & at sea a storm),

dampens light, hissing cats stalk each other (circling on the porch), old dogshit hardens & crumbles on the walk, that fern yellowing in the window. In the morning the girls in the parochial school outfits carry their sweaters in the crooks of their arms (the dog is frantic, barking about something), thru open kitchen windows hear forks bang against plates (small bird on the clothesline chirps). The air visibly thickens (grey, heavy, hotter, damp)(in the valley sirens pass) so that greens flatten, blend together (the drums of the Bee Gees right thru the wall from the house next door), dirt on the window filters light. November sun, the man hosing his car on the street (the rear door on the left is missing, patched with cardboard), the brown dog leaps to dodge the spray, the woman tells her son to come indoors & not to play with "that horrible little girl anymore" (the dog joins her on the concrete porch where she eats a slice of bread, a white Volkswagen circles the block twice seeking a place to park (I see all this thru the dying fern)), the sky is nearly invisible. The reduction of sight thru fog (autos reduced to headlights at half a block, buildings reduced to shadows), there is no outside, little distance (the damp collects into droplets on the leaves of the eucalyptus & rains when wind shakes the branch), machines & even cats move slowly, cautiously, sound fails to travel (alone on the hilltop park by the ghostly tennis court, half-seen)(heavy jewelry of dew in the cobwebs). Heavy feminine arms poke thru the open window, clipping children's t-shirts onto the clothesline (the squawk of an unexpected goose), this village of backyards (dense with chaotic greenery, old collapsing fences), the air between this hill & the next visible in that it filters light, mutes color (shimmering haze of warmth itself), the sun touching only its hilltop but fully bathing this southern slope (a white cat with pink ears steps along the fence). The gloom. Tomatopaste dogstool (a thicker pen), a thinner pen, those houses in the blowing fog (smokey), the sky, the sky at a distance. Hummingbirds in the plum tree (the window streaked with rain), across the street thru an open window too-red flesh glows from a television (a sort of lamp), he hurries down the street carrying something under his levi jacket past the woman with

the rose umbrella. As the haze fades small flies are illumined hovering under the porch (the Brandenburg concertos drift out a window), footsteps descend the stairs (thousands of tiny butterflies rise out of the yard next door), his shadow crosses the window (an automobile windshield on the next hill catches the sunlight, reflecting it here), huge orange monarch settles on the spinach & is still (the jet in the plum tree exits, those tiny butterflies are termites). Under the eucalyptus night's dew remains morning's puddle (indentations on the tennis court), a thorny vine probes between the boards of the fence (single strand of web stretches in the breeze, visible when it 'catches' the light (at night that plane would only be a cluster of lights moving quickly between stars)), you close one eye to look in that direction (knights do, nice stew), spiders in the parsley. High small scoops of cloud flatten into a grey filter (the light diffuse) softening colors in the yards (the weight of a rug pulls on the clothesline), the slow progress of the garbage truck (a jet emerges from the screen), the breath of the garbagemen like smokestacks. A 'window' in the sky (for liftoff), a large wooden box the size of a refrigerator by the *no dumping* sign, the word 'fragile' stenciled on upside down, the wet grass would soak our pants to sit down on, mud's slipperiness (so he will 'rise to the occasion,' join the sky)(below, clouds rest on the sea — "we are going thru turbulence at this time")(the higher clouds are filmy, the lower patchy, thicker & west lies a gray-white blanket over the ocean)(reflection of the sun on water mottled by tides)(thru a filter of clouds: more clouds, below which brown squares of land)(glare of the sun on the wing out the window, the shadows of clouds across the gleam on the green surface of the sea (ocean)). Still, by the ocean, water & air meet, a dull horizon (the bank of clouds having moved south & over), the humidity foretells a slight chance of rain, kids bicycling their way to school, the sharp cliffs of La Jolla visible between houses. Different trees here shape the 'stupid sky' (lighter as if drier, blanched, but small dark clouds hang over Mission Bay), stunted (a typewriter in a dorm room 3 flights up stops its intermittent chatter), operations (how low meets high pressure, forming

clouds) & systems (from the ocean & south by way of Alaska or Oregon, or up from Baja), sounds dissolve quickly in the friction of sea's breeze, pigeons & gulls tiny baffles turned loose in the air. Down a slope of iceplants & across a railroad track to the cliffs of Del Mar (the sky perfectly a dome), the sun, setting, grows red & swollen (behind us the cypress trees give the bottom of the sky a deckled edge), one small cloud well to the south, the evening fog invisible until the sun is directly behind it, when suddenly the cottony bank is a luminous white rushing in our direction (broken by the fog, the sun sets in fragments), a middle-school cross-country team jogs past, following the track (a man named Hillel does Tai Chi). The solitude of afternoon (voices & birdsongs), the slightest trace of high clouds streaked across the deep blue (which birds were those, grouped in a broken line, moving so quickly just barely over the ocean water (we took this as a search for food), dissolving into the general mottle of the bay (which shocked us, making us wonder if all that speckledness was not life, a vast city with no land)), the small plane of a weekend pilot whirrs past, bugs so small you don't see them if they're not in the light, a breeze trapped in the plum tree struggles to get free. The gray gathers (not clouds as yet, but high streaks, smears, amassing), the sun muted, shadows softened in their afternoon slant (no breeze at all). The sun, tho risen, watery in the eastern haze, a yolk (dogs yap to hear the cry of geese), colors filling in on the eastern slope of the hill, the first glistening of the damp grass (now gulls call down in the valley). Smell of won ton district amid the odors of the alley wrapped in fog, morning's cooking (squeal of a clothesline pulley), the dog crosses the street to sleep in the sun. The valley, an inverse dome, deepens the sky (today's many small clouds drifting together, high up), the insistent thunder of a low helicopter (the plane in front of the muted sun a silhouette), when the sun rises from behind a thick cloud to behind a thin one, a diffuse brightening, false sunrise, occurs. The exact song of certain birds (a drawn-out 'whistle' followed by a burst of chirps) fills the air (which ones are they?), an odd haze blurs distance (you make out the tower atop Candlestick Hill, mere

shadow on the horizon, solely because you expect it). A winter chill (the moon full, visible thru the fog), steam from the shower pours into the kitchen (carries a cup of coffee thru the yard like a torch), ducks in the city. Rain releases odors in the garden, then stops as the air cools (all the moisture on the freeway alters its tone), not one bird visible in the grey sky (but we hear them in the trees). Leaves fall from the plum tree, drifting into the snail-chewn spinach (the bright glare whiter because filtered thru a thin cloud (then shadowy as a thicker one passes)), from that chimney (not a chimney but a rusty brown pipe) I see smoke (it dissolves in the strong wind immediately), flashes of sunlight come & go (the soil is damp, drops on the parsley glow). Day's first light yellows the world (moon full in the blue sky), the sun's golden flashes off the windows of Mount Davidson (garbagemen wheel their huge barrels down an empty street), the blue lightens, colors pale to a conventional neutrality (not to be betrayed till twilight). The haze on the bay (the horn of a locomotive), the frost on the windows (the cat on the rooftop nuzzling the drainpipe), gulls in a loose formation, not clouds but the thinnest film of white (one gull well to the rear). White cat on the fence regular as a rooster (haze so fine that just the sharpness is missing from those homes on the next hill) (uniform construction, but no order to the pastels), the shadows of morning), a friend on his way to work stops to say hello, a jet deafens the sky (we pause before continuing speaking), a firetruck in no apparent hurry goes by. A fly bangs at the window (the fly bangs at a window), the warm haze deepens, the next hill half-hidden, the dog goes from child to child getting pets (staring at the sun with my eyes shut, a complex web of orange arcs, vibrating, continually changing, impossible to focus on, seems to appear), but inside the livingroom is shadowy, the sun not yet in the west (cat sleeps in the easy chair), the wild birds of the backyards absent from the treeless street. The haze deepens further (the hill a shadow broken only by the sun reflected off windshields), the whine of powertools swells the November air (the sound of dishes clattering in a sink) warm enough for baseball (the sun shines on this ink before it sinks into the paper).

(You waken to the smell of rain.) Late breakfast in winter means only three more hours of sun, the shadow of steps upon steps, the glistening television antenna (I hear water flush thru the pipes of the next house)(the valley already shaded, you see that bird because it's caught the light), this brightness without warmth, the sculpted shade of a Cypress on Silver Avenue stands out. Thru the white cotton curtain a sequence of reds, oranges, yellows light up the sky until, going beyond, the clouds (high, thick) are a luminous yellow-white (then this moment of dawn too is breached & the sky suddenly settles into a dull blue-gray). Light planes, small trucks, rain, footsteps upstairs ("That's all the news you need on a Tuesday morning"), the community of sound fills the air. In the kitchen the yellow plastic bucket fills (rain filtered by roof), the interiority of the world encased in storm, the sky not an even gray but patches of dark & light (on the freeway a siren). A final shower from a (not quite) cloudless sky, lingering pools of damp on the wooden front steps (steaming fence), concrete dries faster than asphalt. Crisp clarity (breath visible even indoors), frost on the windows goes damp & starts to clear (the privacy of a sinus headache: weather is "out there," distant)(the sun, not visible from this location in the house, slipping behind a cloud briefly, the entire street dims & greys, then brightens again just as quickly, then darkens). The limited warmth of a fragile sun (clouds drift), brightness is an element of color (but the relations remain fixed, tho certain tones (white, yellow) are accented in the light)(none of this affects the sound of a neighbor's hammer or the vibrations of a massive jet), I watch the flecked brown paint of the steps as the sun emerges from the grillwork of cloud. Thru the clear air a cool breeze sifts (she sits under the plum tree on a white stool, carding wool), carrying with it distant voices off radios (the tone is never the same live)(impossible to hear what they say), the sound of a shower from the house as a window steams up (a small airplane, a pulley song, the pull of the wool through the rows of pinlike teeth). Shadow of two clothespins on a line in a breeze drifts over the frosted glass of the bathroom window (no shape to the sun, the glare too intense to sort

one out), a cloudless day & chill (less smog on a Monday), a little red-haired dog smells the weeds clumping up out of a crack in the driveway. Two hands, thrust out a kitchen door, snap dust from a towel (coffee steams from its cup on the porch railing), one part of the sky (southeast) is whitest (the sun at its core), a deeper blue the further away one gets (webs of clotheslines in all these yards, half-tended fuchsias, a woman sweeping in her patio, cats on the fence), the tree barely rustles in the light breeze. A sooty haze reduces the hills to planes, one over another (in spite of the cold the roofer wears a t-shirt), the colorless light of an average sun, a flock of small birds over the valley abruptly changes direction. Spiders in the spinach (the yard is a civilization), the air is still (mid-morning, mid-week), the hush of valley traffic, one bird somewhere in the plum tree (I sit on the stoop with my eyes shut, feeling the sun on my arms, on my legs), the song of water in the pipes, the breeze in the chard. The smell of tar in the dull haze (the chorus of dogs, the distant growl of big trucks), gulls over the valley, the cloudless sky is nearly white. The haze only deepens, chalky shadows (even the flash of sun off a windshield is diffused), the smell of pine & fir in the air, spiderweb's shape is determined by the frame it's joined to (white cat tiptoes along the fence), broken spider glistens in the breeze. The sun directly over the flat haze creates a dull glare (cupped hands shade eyes), the street itself shining, the world silent (imagine all the people), in the gutter wadded, half-dissolved papers blow in the warm wind. A gull over the valley circles (the cumulative shush of traffic, no one part standing out), the loud flapping of wings close up (the first light against the east side of these houses), the trees filled with chirping, the sun's warmth as it comes through a shirt. Squeal of a clothesline pulley (a thin fog, the dew burning off the grass), two cats, wrestling, tumble thru the carrots (dog begins barking)(neither the butterfly nor the jet seems to notice). The gray light of day (voices come thru the window, children on their way to school, someone clearing their throat), impossible to find the juncture between this listless haze & the few patchy clouds (mere suggestion of the next hill), a parakeet's

hysteria, a power saw. One ray of muted light (very white) angles thru the thickening clouds (only the inmost branches of the plum tree still bear leaves)(the cat is sneezing)(today's traffic very loud). Red sky at morning (scoops amid clouds), a blonde woman raises a small boy up in her arms (the hill's slope green with new grass), storm's bank clearing. The glare in the warm haze bleaches garden's colors (buzz of a small plane), shimmer of a spider's thread in the plum tree light.

△

B O O K R E V I E W S

Pre-Faces & Other Writings and *Vienna Blood & other poems.*
JEROME ROTHENBERG.
New Directions. 1980 and 1981.

by GEORGE F. BUTTERICK

Pre-Faces is a collection of Jerome Rothenberg's introductions to his several anthologies, many of his commentaries from within those anthologies, and other statements of poetics, beginning and ending with interviews in which he further advances his views. What we are offered is a useful compendium of concerns that have occupied American poets since at least 1960. The earliest writing in the collection is an exchange of letters with Robert Creeley on "deep image." Creeley is more incisive, though Rothenberg is more comprehensive, and this is true throughout the volume.

He charts it all, the great "tradition," the progeny and phylogeny. Not in prose as rapid as Olson's in all its bobsled twistings, or Snyder's wizardly crispness, but no one has *summarized* it all better, synthesized and incorporated it, while urging it on. It is a tradition truer than the Leavis/Eliot one he grew up against, which would simply exclude him (right at the door) and which persists in many forms—publishing contests, university appointments—today. His is a tradition deeper, back to "the first mythologized shamans of the paleolithic cultures" (he's got it all in caps, to celebrate it), in which he has been a wakeful participant these past twenty years. He is the quartermaster of postmodernism. No one has created anthologies as tools, "Jaws-of-Life" rescue devices for freeing areas of thought, in quite the same way he has. He abhors the fixed, the absolutist, the czarist. He is not magesterial: "The only absolutes for poetry are diversity and change (and the freedom to pursue these)." His views are neither niggardly nor niggling. In the current floor-model term, they are holistic: "not 'a house divided against itself' but contemporaries working toward mutual competition." He is willing to hold hands with philosophy and religion, anthropology and science.

He was wise to begin with a dialogue with William Spanos, professor of posthumanism and editor of *Boundary 2*; it is both a means to measure his growth and an outline of what's to come. One sees there that it is Rothenberg himself "who keeps raising alternative propositions, eluding the trap of his own visions as he goes." The "pre-face" for the anthology *Revolution of the Word*, with its brief history of twentieth-century poetry, reads especially balanced and staunch. It is a very useful crib-sheet for Avant-Garde 1. Throughout the volume, he honors mystics and madmen, yet does not appear very mad himself on the page. He belongs to the contemplative order rather than the flagellants. "Recover" is his commitment, and one theme holds clear: poetry persists "as process, as preparation: it is evolving, contradictory, not fixed or rigid but 'with an infinite capacity for taking on new forms,'" while the aim of poetry itself is "liberation from spiritual & political oppression." The topics are all of vital concern: the "oral impulse" or recent poetry, the mythic and "primitive," "ethnopoetics," "tribal" culture, the poet as shaman, seers and "see-ers," process poetry, the poem-as-performance. It's very usable as a collection, complete with an index and cross-referencing.

Nevertheless, there are two areas of uneasiness, interrelated. First, how wide is it necessary to extend the definition or boundaries of poetry? At the same time, what if the examples given are not always the most convincing or even the most self-sustaining? Beyond these considerations, there is not the slightest doubt of the necessity of his position. Let me elaborate.

One of the most important essays on poetics in the volume is "New Models, New Visions: Some Notes Toward a Poetics of Performance" (1977). In giving what I believe to be an accurate account of recent literary and cultural history, Rothenburg also, in passing, questions the appropriateness of a few very familiar and elementary terms. When faced with various "ritual models of performance" such as "happenings," mantric meditations, "earthworks," "dreamworks," and "bodyworks" ("including acts of self-mutilation and endurance that seem to test the model"), he questions terms like "painting," "sculpture," and even "poetry" itself. But—the question may well be—why? Why not simply reserve the term "poetry" for something other than what he proposes and practices? Why not call his work "performance" or "language-event" instead of poetry? Why not *reserve* the term, rather than expand it? Why not preserve it for any or all of those old definitions of poetry—whether "a meter-making argument," "jigging veins of

rhyming mother wits," "a drainless shower of light," or "as if the top of my head were taken off"—none of which do the "Horse Songs" of the Navajo Frank Mitchell, for example, particularly accomplish.

Rothenberg reports with approval the blurring of boundaries or distinctions. In "New Models, New Visions," he observes: "that there is a continuum, rather than a barrier, between music and noise; between poetry and prose (the language of inspiration and the language of common and special discourse)... that there is no hierarchy of media... that qualitative distinctions... are no longer operational..." (A fellow said to me the other day, "I read *my* poetry in the *Wall Street Journal*," meaning the market prices, and—given Rothenberg's generous guidelines—who was *I* to deny him?) Rothenberg also writes: "There is a move away from the idea of 'masterpiece' to one of the transientness and self-obsolescence of the art-work." Another visitor, older fellow, said, "As my time runs out, I want nothing *but* 'masterpieces,'" and even my own eye finds too easily the "slob" in "self-obsolescence."

Why *extend* the definition of poetry at all, why not reserve it, conserve it even, hold it to its traditional all-or-nothing character, the synaptic flash that fixed all of us there in the first place? Who gains most by withholding judgment, the good artist or the bad artist? One might begin to balk. Often the theory risks being more interesting than the poems, as in the translation inspired by *germatria* or kabbalistic number play, such as this one entitled "Messiah":

Snake.

Or this one, entitled "The Soul of Adam":

Lilith.

The odd things about the avant-garde, an objection might run, is that it is perfectly willing to adopt other traditions, even the strictures of such traditions—wither *haiku* in 1914 or *germatria* in 1978—and yet forego what is called the "tradition" of such individual talents as, say, John Donne, just because it was once touted (tainted) by Eliot. Surely Pope's "Essay on Man" has as much intrinsic wisdom in it as the *Zohar*?

Rothenberg may be overfond of touchstones and designated "movements." "Ethnopoetics" has validated itself, but "deep image" was a dead end, because of its intrinsic incoherence and lack of adequate definition, and also misuse by subsequent literary critics, eager for any terms of

convenience by which to summarize, or subdue, the new poetry that they couldn't quite handle otherwise. (One can't help but feel that as a term, "deep image" is more accurate for Rilke, perhaps, than for any American poet to whom it has been clamped.) Likewise, Rothenberg's proposal for "total translation," magnificent though it may be in its conception, reads less convincingly given the examples offered, making the need to translate the "untranslatable" doubtful in the first place. Some of the results are probably less interesting than shouted instructions in aerobic dancing at the Y taken down off tapes by anthropologists sixty years from now.

> hey it's nice it's nice it's nice
> to see them yeah to see
> our mothers do the ladies' dances
> oh it's graceful & it's
> nice it's nice it's very nice
> to see them hey to see
> our mothers do the ladies' dance

On the page, of course, so much falls flat. A ritual "event" enters a desiccation (desecration?) chamber when it is entered in a book. There is no literary subsitute for the whirling of dervishes or the ten-mile run.

He seems enchanted by the theory, though blind to the fact his examples do not alway suffice. The proof has got to be in the pudding, but the samples he gives—"I am still carving an ironwood stick. / I am still thinking about it," or "Dad a da da / Dad a da da / Dad a da da / Da kata kai"—are hardly going to nourish us when we are thrown into cells for a brain rinse by Big "Person," or when we're driving alone in the greyness to work or back from a job interview, or any of the times we *need* the mnemonic ring and brace of poetry, singing in the mind. Olson in the ambulance on the way to die recited *Lear* to Charles Boer, not

> Now I don't feel,
> Now I don't feel,
> Now I don't even feel like going to my rancho,
> For there at my rancho it is so ugly,
> And here in Wirikuta so green, so green...

The universe breathes both in and out. Rothenberg has expanded our vision of the possible, and for this we must be forever grateful and honor him. But there are other movements, contractions, that must be taken out of the hands of autocrats and the officious. His grandly titled "Revolutionary

Propositions" from 1966 are just not very memorable; the language is lost to the thought. Still, one understands what he is up against, and has been up against. The resistance still comes from the "other side," in all its superciliousness, its wallowing pride. James Dickey in a new preface to a collection of opinions called *Babel to Byzantium* calls William Carlos Williams "a poet of no merit whatsoever... a writer flat, obvious and uninteresting beyond the telling"—just as a reminder that certain forms of strife are eternal.

What Rothenberg is objecting to is the forced feeding, the imposition of "rule," of hierarchy of tastes called the "Western tradition," otherwise called the "academic." He would rather be on the side of the heretics and messiahs. There is not the slightest doubt he is needed, even if from time to time he sacrifices his own definition and judgment to the cause. His position is ultimately moral and political as well as personal. It is implicit in such statements as "a recognition of the new/old order in which the whole is equal to but no greater than the works of all its parts." He practices no exclusion. For the reader of *Pre-Faces* not to be aware how successfully he does this in the anthology *America A Prophecy*, it may seem that the theory, the vision, stands alone.

Thus we are fortunate to have another manifestation of Rothenberg's ideas in action. *Vienna Blood* collects the poems he has written since *A Seneca Journal* (1978). In addition to their intrinsic value, the poems might be read as a complement to his theoretical writings. Indeed, some of them seem intended to be taken so, with titles such as "The Structural Study of Myth" and "Notes for a New Wilderness" (by the editor of *New Wilderness Letter*). Notes accompanying most sections further encourage this impression. Although Rothenberg has never been strongest or most celebrated as a personal poetic voice or stylist, but rather a representative exploratory one and transmitter of lore, the other thing these present poems remind us of besides theory is the warmly humorous nature of the author—the wit of wisdom, not just word-play. Some lines still suffer from limpness and oversimplification, a mere jotting accumulation without much counterpoint or refinement, and some get the big razzberry they deserve planted on their foreheads, such as this "Scenario" for fellow performance artist Richard Schechner:

yiddish
vaudeville

is

fantastic
life

followed by:

2000 people in the world
with mirrors

(Nyahhh. So what?) Others are not poems as much as paradigmatic gestures. "Notes for a New Wilderness," for example, is promising until it gets too self-conscious and diminishes into "only these notes"—a betrayal of itself.

The occasional poems as a group are least interesting, but they are reassuring nonetheless, such as the tender series on his wife's birthday, even though there isn't a word in it, let alone an image, that isn't as traditional and predictable as a rug, and none as intrinsically tortured as part 3 or "'the Jew of Malta'" or "Sutter's Gold" or "The Adventures of The Jew." Such simplicity is welcome, however, in the poem on his son's Bar Mitzvah, where wordplay would have been an indulgence not entirely appropriate in the moment of pure family joy, where no decoration other than their own lit hearts and eyes is called for. But there is also the shocking oversimplicity elsewhere of "o poets poets / we are all split for love / of woman of the world...," no matter how well-intentioned in its address to the imprisoned Afrikaans poet Breyten Breytenbach.

A notebook poem to David Meltzer is sufficiently intriguing, but more engaging is the series of "Cards"—perhaps because it is dimensioned, chromatic, has an external specificity, as explained in the notes (each of the ten sections was a response to a different picture postcard). There is not only the focus of referentiality and the advantage of play (homo ludens), but interconnectedness of phrase and image. The brightness of "A Poem in Yellow After Tristan Tzara," one of the best little poems in the book, could put pep in your step the rest of the day, while "Abulafia's Circles," after the thirteenth-century mystic and poet, is simply the finest poem in the collection, should be the title poem, and is Rothenberg's best since "Poland / 1931" in terms of unpredictable satisfaction (the satisfaction of unpredictability). It is a sustained narrative telling, yet as happy as dada is s'posed to be, as much unlike surrealistic shattered-chatter as it is a broad cultural extravaganza. More important, it is a spirited mythic and linguistic engagement in every deep sense Rothenberg in his wide learning knows. It's a totalizer, and the

proof of his method.

It may well be that Rothenberg's greatest strength is the articulation and promulgation of theory, but it's also true that if we didn't have the poems, we wouldn't trust the other writings so. △

Shadow Train. JOHN ASHBERY.
Penguin. 1981.

by MICHAEL PALMER

> I photographed all things,
> All things as happening
> As prelude...
> "Litany" (left column)

> I'll wipe away all trival fond records
> From the interstices of my desirings
> And imaginings, and find the whiteness
> That was there...
> "Litany" (right column)

> Honey, it's all Greek to me, I –
> "Litany" (left column)

So the *voyage imaginaire* continues, laughing at its own interiority and impossibility, its endless postponement:

> Clearly the song will have to wait
> Until the time when everything is serious.

The vehicle now is a shadow train, an image cast against the wall of the cave, a trick of light, but also a line of coaches whose passengers are shades, *manes*. "Out there into stranded night," he had written in "The Task." A voyage through time in which past and future are equally to be "made up" (not "imagined") as you go. A journey in place toward an image of that place where you are said all along to be. And the present, the presence of the voice speaking, can only be calculated by this polytonal play, by picking up and discarding the surrounding shards and fragments. The process resembles a kind of random mapping, an oxymoron as the book would name it:

So many
Patterns to choose from, they the colliding of all dispirited
Illustration on our lives, that will rise in its time like
Temperature, and mean us, and then faint away.

We are meant, encoded, by the surrounds, the congeries of words and objects. It is in this sense that Ashbery has found a solution to the dilemma posed in *Three Poems*, "I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, truer, way." He has found that you can leave all out precisely by putting all down, and has shaped a profoundly paradoxical discourse from this discovery. What we are left with is neither territory nor map but an oscillation between them, a dialectical shadow play of presence and absense. Echoes and quotations surface briefly and are reabsorbed (e.g., "I am the shadowed, widower, the unconsoled," in "The Desperado"[1]). A series of "first persons" is projected and erased. The speaker is not only masked but destabilized as a reference point. The voice itself inhabits a metamorphic state flowing among identities and tones: high romantic, camp, epic narrative, advertising page, hopelessly awkward, and finally, of course, philosophical, where opaque, often anacoluthic statements and propositions are treated as Eternal Verities. What these voices or tones share is a deflection, either minute or broad, from their apparent contextual function. It is in the space of this deflection that Ashbery's irony[2] locates. The acts and events so recorded are neither major nor minor. All are treated as equivalent *données*, effectively obliterating narrative causality. Semantically the work remains in varying degrees indeterminate or open, even if Bloom, Vendler and the herd of self-appointed canonical authorities would wish it otherwise. Yet interestingly the new book's shape emphasizes closure: fifty poems, each containing four quatrains, nearlky all with beginnings and endings where such things are supposed to go. We are offered a frame more firmly fixed than in any of his previous books. It seems to me a direct extension of such poems as "Fragment" which demonstrate a fascination with highly formal order and false symmetries. Now such ordering is incorporated into the larger syntax of the book. It becomes a string or suite of outwardly equivalent elements, again an Ashbery paradox, for it is within this sequence of identical types that multiple variations are generated. The set of possible narratives, suggested, withdrawn, reproposed, exists at the margin or periphery of the text. There is a striking distancing from the "sincerity" of the projective mode of

Black Mountain contemporaries, yet in a broader sense a great deal is shared, for example a concern with formal renewal and an attention to the boldest gestures of modernist forebears. Ashbury's focus in this regard would seem specifically international and cosmopolitan.

In many respects *Shadow Train* represents a return to the rich gnomic mode of the writing preceding *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. Oddly a work I keep hearing in it is *The Tennis Court Oath*, its formal opposite, one that has been important for many poets of my generation not only because of its obvious daring but because of its fragmented eloquence, even lucidity. The radical nature of the gesture has led academic critics to debunk the work as chaotic and formless. Instead they have looked to the more linear mode of *Self-Portrait* and *Houseboat Days* and to the great longer poems of *Rivers and Mountains* for a demonstration of thematic coherence. It is a normative effort designed to place the work comfortably within a tradition of abstract, philosophical verse as exemplified to them by Stevens. Yet this is to ignore willfully both the context of his art—the relationship with O'Hara for example—and the host of alternative Ashberys present. (It should be noted that Stevens does not quite fit this mold either.) I would emphasize the perhaps obvious point that both *The Tennis Court Oath* and *Shadow Train* involve radical justapositions, broad humor, multiple voices, formal innovation and fragmentation. One shadows the other as its darker, uncentered moment.

Shadow Train does not offer us a new Ashbery or for that matter any one particular previous Ashbery. Instead we are given a range of familiar endlessly recombinant personae and gestures. (At a few points they seem too familiar, habits that have outlived their function.) In much of the early work there is an attempt to test and breach the limits of conventional syntax and signification. *Shadow Train* presents a poetry investigating the active boundaries it has already established. As always Ashbery refuses to oversimplify the occasion of the poem, to reduce it to expression, confession, description, instruction, whatever. "you have it but you don't have it," he states in "Paradoxes and Oxymorons," the book's original title poem. The play of words, *logopoeia*, functions as the generative element here as surely as *melos* does for Zukofsky. Ashbery forces attetion toward the polysemous nature of poetic speech (of all speech, whenever such attention is present). Yet he is also witness to the emptying out of meaning that is its constant semiotic shadow. Even, or perhaps especially, his most flattened, apparently direct statements promote this doubleness. Returning to *The Tennis Court Oath* I

find, "All was ready for the continuance of the journey." The poem is "Europe." ∆

An earlier version of this piece was published in *Gazette Du Belletin*, Paris, eds. Emmanuel Hocquard and Raquel.

1. The gesture toward the high romantic, vatic mode is always particularly complex. It is never made without Byronic self-mockery. At the same time it does affirm the myth of a visionary, creationalist speech.
2. In conversation recently Robert Duncan stated that there was "no irony" in Ashbery's poetry. I would agree in the sense that since everything is framed by irony, the other pole is missing. Having no opposite tone to play against, irony abolishes itself—without, it hardly needs to be added, abolishing chance. Herein we can find one of the reasons New Critical analysis is inadequate to a reading of Ashbery's work.

Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke. A Translation from the German and Commentary by Robert Bly.

Harper & Row. 1981.

by Pierre Joris

The publisher of the book under consideration bills his product as a "landmark translation and commentary" by a "National Book Award-winning poet." A landmark it may be, but not in the sense the comment was meant. Rilke is not only of the finest German poets of the century, he is also the most difficult to translate, with the possible exception of Paul Celan. The first translations of poems by Rilke into English appeared as far back as 1938. Since then a number of other translations have been published, some relatively good, some frankly bad — none of which could claim to come close to a hypothetical 'definite' version. A favorite subject in academe, Rilke's work and life has in the meantime given rise to a fullfledged industry and there is no lack of imagination on most aspects of the poet's career.

Pound once said that it took a poet to translate poetry. Given his high standards, I take that to mean a poet worth his salt; but there is something Pound didn't mention: not all poets, even good ones, make great translators. Now Mr Bly — whose own work is not in question here — is a poet who has spent a great amount of his time translating European poetry. It is

therefore not surprising that he should eventually have tried his hand at Rilke. What is slightly surprising is tht a man of his experience should have served up such a botch. There is a heavy-handedness about these English versions that is the exact opposite of Rilke's language. To put it crudely, Mr Bly manages a real feat: He succeeds in making that most spititual, not to say metaphysical (in the literal sense of someone concerned with what lies beyond the physis) poet sound like a Wisconsin backwoodsman, or a kind of zen Davey Crockett.

There are two major problems with Mr Bly's way of going about his job. One is a sign of the times: For the last thirty or so years the paradigm of American poetry has been the use of colloquial American speech patterns as poetry's linguistic bass-line. This, the lesson of Whitman, William Carlos Williams and others, has made for an extremely strong indigenous poetry, in most ways far superior to Europe's production during that period. But, when that paradigm is too consistently applied in the case of translations, it can lead to a stultifying flatness especially for a number of European poets whose work simply dies when planed down into the vox americana. To stay with examples from the German, this is true of, again, Celan, as Corman's and Hamburger's translations show: They simplify the poet's complex and at times tortuous syntax to such an extent that the wrought-iron intensity of the language gets lost. But at least their translations, if weak, have a certain elegance; something one cannot say about Mr Bly's efforts.

Rilke's poems do not reproduce a straight colloquial German, and trying to make him sound that way in American only ruins the work. For such an attempt to have any chance of success, it would further require a much finer and more sophisticated ear than Mr Bly's — the standard of excellence Paul Blackburn's perfect pitch shows in his Lorca translations would be required. How deeply the paradigmatic vision of poetry has become ingrained is shown in the dust jacket's comment on the "simplicity and directness with which (Bly) has captured Rilke's voice, a voice that has not been heard in English before (sic)." Rilke is neither direct nor simple, and any translation that makes him sound that way is a lie.

The second problem is that Mr Bly has the unfortunate habit of wanting to make things perfectly clear. He will therefore not shrink from ruining a perfectly good line by explaining what is happening instead of translating what is there. An obscure spot in the original does not, must not, translate into a clear statement in the English: That is treason to the text besides be-

ing condescendent to the reader as it supposes him/her to be too dumb to deal with difficulties in the poem.

Take *Das Stundenbuch*. Mr Bly translates the title as 'A Book for the Hours of Prayer' — silly and cumbersome; *A Book of Hours*, more accurate to the original, would have done better. In the second poem of this section, the last three lines of the second stanza read in German:

> Nur dass ich mich aus seiner Wärme heben
> mehr weiss ich nicht, weil alle meine Zweige
> tief unten ruhn und nur im Winde winken

A literal, word by word, translation without any literary pretensions would give the following:

> Only that from his heat I rise
> More I do not know, as all my branches
> rest deep below and merely nod in the wind

Mr Bly haltingly explains this stanza as:

> I know that my trunk rose from his warmth, but that's all
> because my branches hardly move at all
> near the ground, and just wave a little in the wind.

Bly's 'trunk' is not there in the German. Even though the image implicitly contains it, making it explicit in the translation is an explanatory addendum that (with the 'but that's all' heavily added to the end of Rilke's line) poetically and rhythmically makes for an unwieldy and leaden line in English. Although this stanza is the worst of the poem, the previous one hasn't been translated any more accurately: the German word 'menschlich,' admittedly not easy to translate, has been rendered as 'in a human way'; the plural 'Madonnen' becomes the singular 'the Madonna,' while 'planen' is given as 'imagine' and 'träume' as 'I think.' The 'Sutanen' of the first line have disappeared completely.

The *Stundenbuch* is comparatively easy Rilke — what happens when Mr Bly gets his teeth into the later poems? Happily for us he did not attempt the Elegies. Unhappily for us he did try his hand at the *Sonnets to Orpheus*. First sonnet, second line: Why translate *Orpheus singt!* as 'Orpheus is singing?' *O Hoher Baum in Ohr* becomes 'A tree inside the ear.' The active 'alles schwieg' becomes 'silence, silence.' So far it's not too inaccurate, although the English is lacklustre and inelegant. The next two lines read in German:

....Doch selbst in der Verschweigung
ging neuer Anfang, Wink und Wandlung vor.

That, in Mr Bly's Americanese, becomes:

...Yet new buildings,
signals, and changes went on in silence.

I cannot fathom what daring brainstorm made the translator render the word 'Anfang,' literally 'beginning,' as 'buildings.' Maybe the tree inside the ear got chopped down and turned into a log-cabin? In the next stanza, Rilke's animals come 'aus dem klaren / gelösten Wald' which becomes a 'relaxed' forest. Next stanza: 'Brüllen, Schrei, Geröhr / schien klein in ihren Herzen' becomes an inaccurate, boring, clumsy and flat: 'Growling, yelping, grunting now / seemed all nonsense to them.' In the final stanza Rilke's 'dunkelstem' (darkest) becomes 'brushy' longing, and where Rilke's 'Pfosten beben' (tremble), Mr Bly's poles are simply 'wobbly.'

One could go on and on: there isn't a poem, a stanza, a line in the book which is accurate to Rilke's text. Throughout the Sonnets Mr Bly gives Orpheus' activity which is 'Gesang' or 'singen' — that is song, singing — (and even the simple 'Lied') — as 'poetry' or 'poem.' In his commentary on that section he explains why he translates 'Gesang ist Dasein' as 'To write poetry is to be alive' — calling a literal translation ('Singing is being') a pitiful result, claiming that 'the whole meaning is gone, because the vowels are too light.' And here lies the whole trouble with Mr Bly's translations: Rilke's poetry is song, is singing, as all good poetry is. The translations into what Mr Bly's sees as 'poetry' lack any sense of song, of singing. The translator's language is dull, uninspired and boringly prosy. Nothing in these translations sings, nothing sparks, nothing comes across to the reader — and Rilke lies buried under a bad, verbose prose. Mr Bly does not have a tree growing in his ear — he's simply cursed with a wooden ear. △

Peace on Earth. JOHN TAGGART.
Turtle Island Foundation. 1981.

by ELIOT WEINBERGER

Today it is ten years and a month after the Christmas bombing of

Cambodia—that final genocidal frenzy of a retreating army. I am reading the day's paper: The former Ambassador to Laos protests that the secret spraying of defoliants over that country in the 1960s, revealed only today, was no secret at all—"Rather, it was not admitted nor confirmed." It is the day's version of the same stories I have been reading every day of my reading life, a reading life sustained by poetry in the wild belief that there is a general sanity in the work, a sanity that rises above the notorious small madnesses of the workers themselves. And today I am reading a poet of my generation, that publicized, self-publicized generation of '68: born during or after "the war," who came of age in (another) "the war," who live there still. I am reading what, for the moment, is still an artifact of the moment, and I wonder how he, I, we have arrived here, for this is our "Peace on Earth":

To delight friends with babies charred in napalm

Since the Napoleonic Wars, there has been no war poetry in the European languages, only antiwar poetry, for modern warfare has eliminated the warrior-hero, the only subject of epic, and replaced him with the tactician, an unheroic figure usually removed from the battle itself, who brilliantly or stupidly maneuvers the slaughter of faceless legions. As yet there is no poetry of tactics, but in English there have been two great clusters of antiwar poetry. The first grew out of World War I, the first war in which a large number of poets participated, and only the second war in history fought by literates. (the first—the American Civil War—had no poets who are still read, and the main antiwar work it produced, *The Red Badge of Courage*, was written by a man born six years after the war had ended. Even to this day only one important American poet—George Oppen—has engaged in combat.)

The poetry of WWI was, above all, written out of comraderie. The men were sent into battle as a company, and returned, if at all, as a company. At the front, they were thrown into a scene of unimaginable horror, yet they never knew—for there was no explanation, and still is none—why the enemy was their enemy. The result, in fact and in the poetry, was a communal rage—at the carnage, at the officers safely behind the lines, at the comfort and platitudes of those at home—but also a great compassion, toward each other and even across the barbed wire. Wilfred Owen's most famous line was first written as: "I was a German conscript, and your friend." The key word is *conscript*: we are (were) both unwilling victims. In the second version of "Strange Meeting," Owen raised this perception to the

immediate and the universal: "I am the enemy you killed, my friend."

In contrast, the work of those who stayed home seems petty, oblivious. (Excepting the 74-year-old Hardy, listening to the big guns across the Channel: "The world is as it used to be... Mad as hatters.") The "War Number" of *BLAST*, for example (recently reissued by Black Sparrow Press) is devoted largely to attacks on Marinetti and the Futurists. Pound contributes some of his weakest satirical verse, and Eliot his impressionistic, apolitical "Preludes" and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night." Only Gaudier-Brzeska's message from the trenches gives any sense of what is occurring not so many miles away. The sculptor picks up a German mauser and breaks off the butt to carve—to have something to carve, to carve something. He writes: "*MY VIEWS ON SCULPTURE* REMAIN ABSOLUTELY *THE SAME*," and, in the context, we know that conviction has not been easily won.

But Gaudier-Brzeska is also filled with idiocies: "THIS WAR IS A GREAT REMEDY... IT TAKES AWAY FROM THE MASSES NUMBERS AND NUMBERS OF UNIMPORTANT UNITS..." The Vorticist position, if it can be called a position, becomes clear some years later in Canto XVI: the war killed one genius, inconvenienced some others, and generally broke up the old gang. Pound's "And because of that son of a bitch / Franz Joseph of Austria... / They put Aldington on Hill 70..." is the war as literary event. It is not the war of Isaac Rosenberg's "A man's brains splattered on / a stretcher-bearer's face." Though Pound is ultimately the greater poet—he also had 50-odd more years in which to write—any attempt at understanding his attitude to the war must account for the fact that it was Pound who suggested to Rosenberg that he ought to enlist.

World War II did not produce much poetry, possibly because both the rage and compassion of WWI were absent in a war that almost everyone felt worth fighting. (Basil Bunting, for one, was imprisoned as a conscientious objector in WWI, but hurried to join the Second.) Its major works were narratives—novels and movies—which tended to explore the psychological effects of war on a miscellaneous collection of individuals, the platoon. This was not exactly the stuff of poetry—nor could the prevailing poetic mode of cleverly-wrought ambiguities encompass Omaha Beach or Iwo Jima, not to mention Hiroshima, the camps. (Nor—and it is shocking—did events affect the prevailing poetic mode.)

It was the Vietnam War of course that led to the greatest outpouring of antiwar poetry in English. Unlike WWI, this poetry was not written by com-

batants. Those who actually fought were unlike any soldiers of previous wars. (And could never be understood by old soldiers. Robert Graves on Vietnam: "Few of the unmaimed survivors will regret their part in this war.") They were boys—average age 19—without wives, children, higher education, careers. They were the first soldiers, ever, to be shipped out as individuals rather than as a company. They went, not with a sense of mission, but out of fear of the punishment for not going. Once there, their fear—of the army, of death, of the strange land—was manipulated and transformed into racial hatred, a policy—and it was a policy—that finally permanently destroyed its own men. It was a hatred that blurred the line between Vietnamese allies and enemies, national boundaries, soldiers and civilians, until the enemy became Asia itself, unconquerable, the symbol of everything that is "not us," that refuses to become us. Those who survived returned as solitary individuals to a country that ignored or hated them, where the only soldier who was not unknown was Lieutenant Calley.

The poetry of the Vietnam War was written at home, but curiously those who fought *against* the war were in a situation similar to that of those who had fought *in* WWI: they were a community united by disaster. Similar, that is, with one tremendous difference: it was a disaster the community had not experienced directly. Vietnam was never, and has never been, more than words in a newspaper and pictures on a television screen. The poets' Vietnam is the metaphor of a metaphor.

It is a poetry of contempt and communion. Away from the war, the poets directed their rage not at war itself (as in WWI) but rather at what was immediately at hand: those they suspected to be the instigators and supporters of the war—not the fat-cat industrialists of wars past, but, surprisingly, the ordinary middle-class suburban American. Read today, some of the most ardent of the "antiwar" poems seem merely the work of snobs, a dull continuation of the old Beat-Square friction. What is interesting however about these anti-"straight" antiwar poems is that they replicate exactly the most jingoistic pro-war poems of other ages: lampooning the enemy for its looks, dress, food, taste, and praising its own people for their superior wisdom, sexual ability, music and so on.

But the other side of that contempt was the deep sense of community among those against the war, and the important position of poets and poetry within that community. Neither has existed since. It resulted in a poetry of celebration, love, ecstasy—the (now pathetic) declaration of a new age.

Surely one of the most beautiful of these poems is Allen Ginsberg's "Genocide" (which has not become dated, as his better-known "Wichita Vortex Sutra" has). In it, the poet dreams that he and the then Leroi Jones are naked in each other's arms:

> ...He wanted
> to protect me in the War
> storm, but was unable
> for the great force that was
> upon us, of strangeness and
> alien white mind in America,
> rising from Iowa, Kansas,
> Nebraska, Wisconsin, Brooklyn.

Jones, at the time, was in his militant anti-white/Semetic/gay phase, and Ginsberg's poem is a vision of the peaceable kingdom, lion and lamb lying down together. It is the Vietnam revision of Owen's "Strange Meeting": We are both conscripts in this madness.

Two artifacts of the period are exemplary, both issues of important little magazines (from a time when little magazines were important): *Some/thing* #3 (1966) edited by David Antin and Jerome Rothenberg, and *Caterpillar* #3/4 (1968) edited by Clayton Eshleman. *Some/thing* #3, a special "Vietnam Assemblage" issue, features a cover by Andy Warhol: a perforated sheet of postage stamps, each stamp depicting a yellow button that reads "BOMB HANOI." *Caterpillar* #3/4 is a regular issue—none of its 270 pages are particularly war-related—but right in the center of the issue are two photographs, captioned only as "Two 12 year old Vietnamese girls burned by American napalm." They are unquestionably the most horrible, indelible photographs I have ever seen.

The *Some/thing* cover was widely admired at the time. Its irony, like all irony required and enjoyed a cognesceti who understood that "BOMB HANOI," though a real button worn in sincerity by many, was not a sentiment shared by poets. But more important, its humor—now somewhat dim—is indicative of a development that had a greater effect on poetry than the news of atrocity: It seemed, then, that all the words had lost their meanings. The Vietnam War was the era of Pentagonese, of "friendly fire," of "in order to save the village it was necessary to destroy it." Half of the *Some/thing* issue is taken from the newspapers, and countless poems were composed out of that profusion of jargon-couched lies. In the absense of the

war itself, the poets could only work from the words of the war. As Robert Duncan wrote in the "Of the War" section of *Passages* (to my mind the greatest poetry to come out of the war) the war had become "the bloody verse America writes over Asia."

There were two responses to that bloody verse. To attempt a Confucian rectification of names, fighting the language back toward meaning, or to revel in the free-floating signifiers through satire or collage. The latter course was naturally easier, especially as the political stance of the poet could be assumed without proof. But when a "BOMB HANOI" could be either funny or blood-thirsty, depending on its writer, it meant that the word had entirely become the invention of its speaker—a solipsism that erased the social contract of language.

Meanwhile, in Vietnam itself, things were real enough, and language—despite the clouds of official euphemism, another legacy of WWI—meant what it said. For years the most popular song on GI jukeboxes was not the Baroque surrealism of Dylan or Lennon or acid rock, but the Animals' plain speech: "We gotta get outta this place." It was a place few poets could take, even second-hand. When *Caterpillar* published the napalm-victim photographs it was generally thought, as I remember, that this time Eshleman had gone too far.

Ten years after the Christmas bombing, the war continues, both there, in the ravaged land, and here, in the bodies and minds of the 2.8 million Americans who "served" (a great nothing and no one) in Vietnam. Possibly as many as 2.4 million of them were exposed to the dioxin-laced defoliant Agent Orange; many of them have suffered or will suffer (and the probability may be the greatest suffering of all) from various cancers, fatal liver dysfunctions, sterility, miscarriages among their wives, birth defects in their children. 100,000 of them have been imprisoned since the war; only 22% finished college. Their rates of suicide, drug-addiction, alcoholism, divorce and mental breakdown are extremely high. The statistics clatter on: These are the most miserable of America, whose physical and mental devastation mirrors the land they left behind.

For the poets, Vietnam has become a forgotten subject. (In fact most of the Vietnam poems were written from 1965 to 1969, and had stopped being written long before the war ended. Was there no longer anything to say? Had the general national antiwar sentiment weakened the necessity for the

poetry? Or did the poets lose interest when they lost their elitist position?) Unlike WWI, there has been, so far, no important work written after the event. Vietnam's only legacy to poetry may be that current obsession of the poets of my generation: non-referentiality. Raised on the empty and mendacious language of the war, they now celebrate that emptiness, a despair masked by theory. It is the converse of the first decades of the century, when WWI killed off the Dadaist and other language experiments, rendering them simply beside the point. (The curiosity, though, is that the "language" poets consider their work political, a blow against the word as capitalist commodity—"meaning" as "market value." This may be the silliest piece of café Marxism yet—one minute on a torture rack in Guatamala and suddenly words would become meaningful again. If at all, non-referential poetry is political only in the Confucian sense that retreat from the world is a political act.)

Yet here is "Peace on Earth," the title poem of John Taggart's new book, perhaps the first poem of interest to come out of the Vietnam War in a decade. Its compositional procedure, which is complex, must first be described:

The poem is in three sections containing, in order, 3,9, and 27 units. Each unit, printed one to a page, consists of 13 lines: an 8-line stanza, a one-line stanza, and each unit within each section rings small changes on the preceding unit. Thus the poem is read vertically, but also horizontally, as the reader inevitably compares, say, line 11 with the next unit's line 11.

Here are four units: the first unit of section one, two facing units from section two, and the last unit of section three. The italicized lines of section two are from *The Winter Soldier Investigation*, a book frequently quoted during the last years of the antiwar movement. The italicized lines of section three are from a Tarahumara healing song.

> To love to love those to love those who
> are in love those who are in a condition
> in a condition
> of hiding to love those who are in
> a condition of hiding to
> love those as children as the
> valient children who have gone into hiding
> children who hide in a house from the roaring.
>
> Care touches the face, untwists the face.

To love those as children who hide to
lay down to lay down with
the children to lay down with the children
in a flame to lay down in a flame of fire.

*

to delight to delight those who are friends to
delight friends by turning by turning
in nape, which is napalm, which the
military likes after the fires burned down and
there was an old man burned
to death with his hands stiff in
rigor mortis reaching
for the sky in prayer or supplication.

Carry torches, carry each other.

To delight friends by praying with hands in napalm
to run burning a
light running burning to death in
a circle to be unable to help oneself.

*

To delight to delight those who are friends to
delight friends by turning
in nape, napalm, which the military
likes and there was an old man burned to
death with hands stiff in reaching
in prayer or supplication
forgiving us what we had done and
there was an old woman lying dead curled.

Carry torches, carry each other.

To delight friends praying with curled hands in napalm
to run a light running
burning to death to be unable to
help to find the river

*

To lift to lift up to lift without

effort to sing high and low high and low
to hold and to lengthen the carol
sana tafan tana tamaf tamafts bai
sing *tamaf tamafts bai* to stand still in the shining
dance in the lily-flower
in the ring of the flower's thought
in the light of day.

Carol heart's ease, ring of flower's thought.

To lift up bones in light in curled leaves and petals
to intend the greatest gifts
to hold the shining
ring that is an ardor and a blossoming.

Toby Olson, in what seems to be an accurate description of the author's intent, has written that "Peace on Earth" is:

> ...a poem whose movement is able to cleanse the dead of the politics that caused their death, resurrect their clean bones, and celebrate their passing... Its title, staring in irony and coming through to the literal, can be seen as a measure of its movement. Like the best religious music, it transforms those who give themselves to it. In the experience of this poem, we can mourn and celebrate the dead with feelings that are purified of anger and resentment; we can give their Spirit Image a place of peace outside and above politics and irony. What John Taggart has done for us... is a holy thing.

To excerpt, as one must, destroys the cumulative effect of 39 similar units. Taggart wants the poem to be read aloud, and its effect has often been compared to the work of current composers like Phillip Glass and Steve Reich. For me at least—having both heard Taggard and tried it myself—it is very tedious, in a way that the "new music" is not. Western music, after all, is made of sounds that are fixed and few, and the combinations of those sounds, the emotional pull of their elaboration, is music's force and meaning—a power that can be maintained even when the variety of sounds is minimal. Poetry of course is the opposite: we are accustomed to idiosyncatic selections from the vast storehouse of the language. When those selections remain the same—in a poem or in a life's work—we lose interest. And in a poem that is evidently not non-referential, relying on sound alone, the reiteration of content—even with slight variations in the words themselves—simply cannot be sustained for very long. Louis Zukofsky's "Julia's

Wild" is lovely, but it's 20 lines long; "Peace on Earth" lasts about 45 minutes.

Worse, the frequent repetition of a word within the same phrase or context only deadens the word. When, during the Vietnam War, John Giorno or Jackson MacLow presented repetitive collages of newspaper words, the intention was mimetic of the contemporary media assault. Ten years later this is not the case—the words, at least, are different. To hear, today, the word *napalm* 21 times in the course of nine 13-line pages only strips the word—the most highly-charged word of the Vietnam War—of its resonance, while ironically making us realize that, yes, *napalm* is one of the most beautiful words in the language.

By attempting to bury the word *napalm* and build a Victorian monument over its grave, Taggart may be, as Olson claims, cleansing the dead of politics and purifying us of anger. But I doubt it.

First, what are we to make of the line repeated with small variations: "To delight friends with babies charred in napalm"? The infinitive implies "Let us..." and we assume that either the line is literal ("delight friends who have charred babies" or "offer charred babies to delight friends"—the one chirpy and blind, the other sadistic) or it is ironic, like Warhol's "BOMB HANOI" (which, so long after the fact, loses its black humor and only recalls a forgotten elitism) or it is a collage and only semi-referential (which, again, ten years later, would be pointless) or it is pure sound (which would be scandalous).

Second, Taggart was not in the war, and has probably never seen Vietnam, a naplam victim, or even napalm itself. This would be irrelevant if Taggart had been able to recreate the word in his imagination—to live through it as, say, Defoe lived through a plague year from before his birth. But in "Peace on Earth" *napalm* remains a word from a book (specifically *The Winter Soldier Investigation*) as the poem, above all, has been made from books.

Third, because he found the word in the library and wrote it down, Taggart—as many contemporary poets would—reads the word mythologically. Napalm becomes the sacred, purifying flame. Which it was not. This mistake has been made before, notably in Denise Levertov's "Advent 1966," one of the most famous poems of the war. In it, the poet invokes Robert Southwell's Burning Babe, an image that is "multiplied, multiplied" in Vietnam. Although the poet insists on the difference between Southwell's

Christ and the napalmed infants, the poem, this far, doesn't work: Southwell's perfect *created* image cannot help but be more powerful than a second-hand image of reality. What I mean is that Levertov (and the reader who knows the Southwell poem) has experienced the Burning Babe directly, in a way that neither poet nor readers have experienced burning babies. But what finally gives the poem its great force is the poet's juxtaposition of herself and Southwell *as poets*: this is what he was permitted to see, and this is what I see. The best Vietnam War poems took the poet as witness; the weakest poems presented the facts or language of the war, spoken by no one.

David Jones could mythologize WWI only because *In Parenthesis* is also a work of directly apprehended luminous details. When Isaac Rosenberg writes, in "August 1914," "What in our lives is burnt / In the fire of this?" he has earned access to the sacred fire because, in the context of his other work and of his life, there is no question of "sincerity."

The problem with "Peace on Earth" is that it is all objectification and no sincerity. It is all verbs without subjects. Complex impersonal musical intellectual constructs have worked well for Taggart in the past (*Dodeka, The Pyramid is a Pure Crystal*). This time I think the construct collapses because it is only theoretical—not taking into account the pleasure or patience of the reader/auditor. And, for that matter, he has taken on a djinn too powerful to bottle in such a small jar.

He was able to write this celebratory hymn not because the time for requiem has come—the living gathered to sing for the dead. Only certain political details of the war have passed—the war itself is not dead, especially among the Vietnamese and among the veterans. Taggart's hymn exists because for us, who stayed at home and fought against the war, *the war was a festival*. An Arcady ruled by death, but an Arcady still. That moment of community—of a generation, of poets—has never returned. "Peace on Earth" (even its title comes from the 60's—a Coletrane concert in Japan) is a nostalgic vision of peace, a vision that belongs to we Luddites who fought the war machine and thought we had won. It may be the last of the old Vietnam War poems—a flowering manured by dead peasants and our dead contemporaries who were too poor or too guileless to evade conscription.

The WWI poet Ivor Gurney wrote: "There are strange Hells within the minds War made." Before those hells are explored, there can be no Paradiso. If a new Vietnam War poem is ever written in America, it will be written by a veteran or one capable of living in a veteran's brain—a poetry of

one who has killed and was almost killed. And if a new Vietnam war poem is written by those of us who stayed home, it will have to acknowledge that we delighted in friends as babies charred in napalm. △

A Letter to the Editor:

If all written knowledge except one work is destroyed from a world fire, I should hope that Ted Enslin's Forms, Synthesis and Ranger would be the work left for civilized sane buildup of a new peaceful balanced society. There is enough in these works to form the basis. It's too sad that Bill Zavatsky didn't take the time and concentration needed to understand the tremendous job that Ted Enslin had done is 'speaking' down onto paper every single facet of his being and in the process leaving man/woman kind a record, a history of what a person can or should be. Enslin's work simply stated is no simple deed. It incorporates ALL. It is as complete a record of man as anything ever attempted. And it is naturally stated.

— HERSCHEL SILVERMAN

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